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A NOVEL

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CHAPTER I

Standing against one of the ungainly pillars that made the entrance hall look like a music-hall lobby, Andrei was waiting for the bell to ring the end of the break. There was not the least danger of his being discovered, the pupils being strictly forbidden to "dirty" the faded mosaic of the main entrance; by contagion, the teachers had also been compelled to observe this rule — a rule two generations old at least — so that the entrance hall was always deserted.

In the dimly lit spaces between the pillars there lay higgledy-piggledy a jumble of models used for drawing-classes: a bust of Alexander the Great, his head gracefully reclining on his left shoulder, Dante's stern profile, a Voltaire with a cunning, gap-toothed grin, old prints black with dust, a stuffed moth-eaten owl and a few broken rusty foils; a pell-mell whose continual increase caused

Oancea, the school-servant, many a sleepless night. Yet he was much too lazy to carry it all down to the cellar.

The corner where Andrei was standing smelt of musty paper; the dust had powdered the noses and cheek-bones of the busts grey, and the window-panes were so dirty that, when a slanting ray of sunshine managed to get through them, they looked like fancy stained-glass windows.

The hall resembled a swimming-pool; from the four corners broad staircases with wrought-iron banisters led to the upper floors. From the entrance door one's eyes fell on the clock that was as large as a cupboard; at a quarter past nine the hands seemed to complete in a strangely accurate way the face of a man with a moustache and square jaws. It was here that the secondary school proper began: the laboratory guarded by a white tin plate with the word "Museum" embossed on it, above which a stuffed condor spread its protecting wings; the corridors flagged with grey and black stone slabs; the walls thickly covered with historical pictures: Prince Dragoş ostentatiously brandishing his mace, Alexander the Good with a white beard that gave him an air of unruffled placidity, Stephen the Great kneeling before the chapel altar, Michael the Brave carrying his battle-axe in his left hand, Carol I. saluting the Turkish volleys ("That's the music I like !"), Queen Maria, the wounded soldiers' mother; zoological plates with dinosaurs, pterodactyls and mammoths; geographic plates: the fauna of every continent (stately lions next to dainty gazelles, pinguins and polar bears standing on their hind-legs, crocodiles watching over their eggs in the shade of the pyramids, on the banks of an appropriate Nile), lithographs after Grigorescu's paintings. Finally, above the door leading to the great hall, the portrait of the school patron and founder.

Out of a mahagony frame, the patron sternly scanned the remote vistas of history. He was wearing a laced Hungarian gala costume, a fur-jacket, a fur cap with an osprey adorned with precious stones, and a gold-hilted sword. The painter, Professor Baruţia, who had been pensioned off in 1925, had concentrated his entire attention on the rendering of the face, brow and eyes. The biographic data revealing the patron's accomplishments were the following:

the son of a peasant from around the town of Arad, he had been a brilliant law-student in Budapest. The thesis he had written for his doctor's degree was first rate, and had been retained by the Imperial Chancery. Its title was *De iniquitate Unionis trium nationum*, and stoutly defended, in faultless Latin, the right of the Rumanians to enjoy the same privileges as all the other nations under the rule of the King-Emperor. After this promising *début*, the patron had set up as a lawyer, but had never pleaded a case for he was too busy manufacturing theses for undergraduates, the sons of great Budapest families. His fortune increased extremely rapidly, and after the 1848 Revolution, during which only a serious illness had prevented him from playing the leading part he deserved, he entered parliament, where he pursued a policy of moderation, the same as Emanoil Gojdu, the Metropolitan Şaguna, and later on Vasile Mangra, the drug-addicted bishop. When in *articulo mortis*, he left his immense fortune to a foundation bearing his name.

His works were collected in a monograph written by Miss Veturia Pop-Ceica, student of history, comprising, apart from the above-mentioned thesis, a long memoir in French addressed *à la Sublime Porte*, mentioning Kossuth's spurs and Bolliac's treason, as well as some mysterious consular matters; some ten letters addressed to a cardinal at the Vatican, and in the second part six pages of reminiscences: a journey by stage-coach to Blaj, the evocation of his mother, a diatribe against Bishop Bob. "Verses" — about fifteen poems in all — left by the patron in an envelope and handed on his death-bed to the canon abbot of Sîn Giorz, with a special mention that they be opened thirty years after his death, were lengthily commented upon. The poems were "Miscellaneous": a madrigal dedicated to a Roman lady whose three children had all died, cut down by diptheria:

Your little birds have found a home
With God, their heavenly Father;

closing with

Console thy grief and dry thy tears
Take heart of grace, be brave!

The envelope sealed with the imprint of a signet-ring contained the beginning of an epic: Divus Trajanus leaving Rome with the intention of founding the Rumanian people, a poetic *curriculum vitae*, and love poems which deeply moved Miss Veturia Pop-Ceica, for the patron began as follows:

The rosy nipple of her breast
A fount of pleasure is for me.

Finally, the patron's work included the translation of the Austrian national anthem, but the researchers had unanimously agreed to pass over this fact in silence. The old people who still remembered the anthem had forgotten its author; perhaps they had never known his name. The lines ran:

Oh Lord, save and protect
Austria and her Emperor!
That guided by the sacred law
He should reign wisely over us.

Painter Baruţia had wonderfully set forth these manifold accomplishments in the portrait of the patron: the shiny bulging forehead, the Socrates-like baldness, the greying locks coiling behind his ears, suggestive of an elderly romantic, the bristly silvery eyebrows, but most of all the large, moist, dark brown eyes devoid of pupil and iris; the imperial side-whiskers as rigid as solidified foam, and the white hand resting on the covers of a bulky in-folio, all produced an unforgettable impression. By a trick of causes and effects, the patron's fame had been consolidated by the prestige of the school which enjoyed a good reputation throughout the country. The pupils were made to study seriously, discipline was very strict, and on national holidays the fêtes given at the "Regina Maria" Theatre were quite important events. The excellently trained choirs were listened to excitedly as the audience knew that the singing-master Toma Corian was mortal drunk. That was why the audience was sitting tensely, looking forward to a catastrophe, and the bigwigs in the stalls could distinctly hear the master flying at the sopranos, lower-form boys who,

gaping admiringly at the chandeliers, had quite forgotten about their singing: "You swine ! You'll catch it! I'll knock your blocks off and send the whole lot of you to hell!"

The main attraction was no doubt the drama *The Founder* written by Silviu Burtea, the Rumanian master, especially the last act of the play, a finale that crowned the whole event. The patron lay dying on a camp-bed (in spite of his wealth he led a sober life, like a soldier of his nation) surrounded by his disciples wringing their hands in despair. Then the door would open and a court official as dazzling as a rainbow would bring the patron the highest decoration of the Austrian Empire, the Grand-cross of the Leopold Order, set with diamonds. Chilled with the cold of death, the patron raised himself, leaning on his elbow, and exclaimed:

"I see... I see... how from the mists a country rises like the sun. She... my only love... All my strength... yes, all of it... I have devoted to her. There will still be hard moments... yes... they are sure to come... The brothers will still be temporarily parted... But... never! Never shall the barbarians enslave us!" And he would breathe his last, a smile full of confidence lingering on his purple lips, while the choir in the wings struck up the heroic march "Awaken Rumanian!"

Warmly congratulated by all and sundry, the teacher, a shy and self-conscious young man, was experiencing the intoxication of success: that is why he wrote the play all over again every year, maintaining, however, the main points of the original plot which he continually enriched with new facts issuing from his inexhaustible veneration.

In the corner where he was standing Andrei felt benumbed with the cold. The spring sunshine outside seemed a delusion here. The peeling leather of his satchel had become damp. He tried to take a step, but on the floor the sheets of printed drawings rustled, covering his boots with a fine pollen-like dust. He stood motionless, listening to the subdued noises of the school: a door was banged somewhere (it must have been Drăgan expelling some boy from his class-room), an open window was creakingly swinging on its hinges; from the inner court came screams (some school-

master must have been absent). All this was so familiar! At that moment he would have liked to do something — kick Alexander the Great's curly head, or yell. From Oancea's basement dwelling the smell of fried onion was wafted up in waves. Andrei leaned against a column and closed his eyes. He knew he would ask himself for the hundreth time: 'Now, what next?' He thought it was no use cherishing the vain hope that they would forgive him or take into account his splendid marks. He glanced at the clock: half past twelve. Another half-hour... With a bitter smile he remembered the joy with which the pupils had written on the left-hand corner of the blackboard the days left up to the vacation. There were some who could at any moment tell how long it was till Easter, in seconds and minutes. No, he would not think of this either. To while away his time he opened his satchel, took out all his books neatly covered with blue paper. He balanced them in his hand, set them down on the floor and covered them with drawings representing Laocoon and his sons entwined by serpents. In his satchel there were two slices of buttered bread covered with sour plum-jam. He bit off a piece mechanically, but was unable to chew it. 'Mother,' he thought and set his jaws to keep back his tears. He knew quite well that after the first moments of revolt and despair she was sure to comfort him. 'It is alright, ducky, don't fret...' But with what apprehension they would think of the future! What a lot of shattered hopes! An engineer or a physician... Twenty to one. He felt a pain in his stomach. For a week breakfast, lunch and dinner had been agony. No doubt, for a time his friends would admire him... He counted them, although he knew there were no more than two: Lucian and Dan, his cousin. Traian Măriș would rejoice openly. He would be rid of a rival, sure of the first prize now, maybe also of a scholarship for the University. The others, he supposed, would just react normally. 'A conceited ass, serves him right!' 'Poor Andrei, fancy him doing such a thing!' 'I'll have to change forms now. Whom shall I crib after?' Then they would forget him, naturally. He hated the whole lot of them, although he'd willingly change lots with any of them, even with the humblest ploughed pupil. This thought humiliated and maddened him. 'Why

the devil am I waiting here like a convict?' It was a quarter to one now. He went on his way with a heavy tread, and the brass-tips on the soles of his shoes rang against the flooring. He mounted the steps and started along the corridors, listening to what was going on inside the schoolrooms. That very moment someone laid a hand on his shoulder. He started and turned round. Lucian Varga had stopped in front of him. Behind his old-fashioned gold-rimmed spectacles the look in his eyes was painfully intense. He did not know what to do with his hands and was cracking his ink-stained fingers.

"Andrei... I've been waiting for you all morning. I didn't even attend the first classes..."

"That was very brave of you," snapped Andrei, feigning indifference; then, scared lest he had hurt Lucian who might turn his back on him and leave, he tried to smile but only managed a grimace.

"I looked for you at your home too... this morning," Lucian went on in an even gentler tone. Then he added anxiously: "Do your people know?"

"No!" answered Andrei curtly, to conceal his anxiety.

(Everything had suddenly come back to him and was dreadfully present.)

"And what do you mean to do?" said Lucian in a trembling voice.

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Andrei..." With a shy, almost feminine movement, Lucian laid his hand on Andrei's shoulder, then withdrew it promptly: "Don't do anything rash, d'you hear?"

Andrei burst into a peal of laughter. He had never been as fond of Lucian as he was now, Lucian with his ink-stained fingers, his dimmed spectacles, his hair cut short according to school regulations and parted carefully: the very picture of the model schoolboy. His large upper lip made every smile seem shy, like an apology. Lucian went on:

"I'm so glad to have met you! What are you doing this afternoon?" He stopped terrified. The apparently commonplace question had acquired a strange significance.

Andrei shrugged his shoulders. He was just thinking: 'From now on I'll be able to smoke as much as I like.'

"For goodness' sake, Andrei," Lucian got hold of both his hands and shook him, "don't let yourself go... No... it won't..." He could not find his words, but felt he had to speak. He knew he would make a fool of himself, but couldn't help it: "After all, you don't even know what decision they've taken."

"But I do."

"How? Have you heard anything?"

This inquisitiveness irritated Andrei. He answered sharply:

"I suspect something."

Lucian heaved a sigh of relief. He glanced at his wrist-watch and said hurriedly:

"The bell 'll soon go..." He moved up to Andrei, solemnly, as if he meant to tell him some secret: "Andrei... but please... don't tell anybody... Răducanu's going to defend you. He said to me yesterday: 'We haven't the right to desert him. Andrei is an honest-minded young chap!' Andi, you're not alone... At what time...?"

"One o'clock... I won't be late."

He was very glad Lucian had waited for him. Had he turned all those questions over in his mind all by himself, he would have surely collapsed. As it was, to make an impression on Lucian, he had hit on an attitude. That is why he made a theatrical gesture: he took off his school-cap and flung it out of the window, watching it sail in the air, carried by the wind. He laughed. Lucian stared at him with wide-open eyes.

"Listen here... when they've... when they've... I'll be waiting for you. We have lunch only at half past three, when father comes back from the factory. But if you want me to, I'll stay with you the whole day. I've got some money... we might go to a restaurant! If you like, even to the 'Palace'! Then to the pictures," he said trying to look cheerful.

"Alright," said Andrei listlessly. His heart was beating fast. It was time for the bell now.

Lucian came close to him, put his arm round his shoulders, pressing them. Then he turned and ran away with quick, mincing steps. Andrei thought of Lucian's words: 'You're not alone... Răducanu's going to defend you.'

Before the row had broken out, Răducanu had been their form master. He was a small man with an olive-coloured complexion, a very merry person, although at times his laughter and jokes seemed forced. He had managed to get through high school somehow or other, and had then gone to France travelling as a stow-away.

He had attended the courses at the Sorbonne and had earned the money for his studies by washing dishes in the Quartier Latin *boîtes*, acting as guide in the Louvre for Rumanians eager to see the *Gioconda* and the *Venus of Milo*, and by coaching schoolchildren. As soon as the heavy tread of the German topboots was heard in Paris, he returned to Rumania, and headmaster Lucaci who wished to have a picked teaching staff got him appointed natural science master. Răducanu was fond of Andrei, although the latter had no special inclination for the branch he taught. And then, in 1943, when he had thrashed Horciony, Răducanu had hushed up the affair. Maybe... Andrei shrugged his shoulders. Still, it was good to know one was not alone.

The bell rang for the break. The corridor filled with children in no time. The masters strutted along solemnly, the roll under their arm, without taking any notice of Andrei. Father Crăioc made his majestic appearance, treading solemnly (he suffered from gout) and pulling now and then absent-mindedly his grey goatee, for which he had been nicknamed "Billy-goat." A small first-form boy walked close behind him, tugging now and again at his cassock. He was weeping bitterly: "Please, Father... Please... Father... My dad will thrash me."

"Serves you right! Move along!"

"Oh, but Father... I didn't do anything really!"

"I'm through with you. I've given you a four."

The little fellow found an unusual argument.

"Please, Father, priests ought to forgive."

"Oh, just listen to that," said Father Crăioc in his hoarse bass voice. He turned round with difficulty and raised his hand as big as a shovel, the bluish cords of his veins powerfully thrown into relief. "Take care, Popescu, if I ever get my hands in your mane, you'll be left without a hair on your head! D'you get me, you...?"

Forgetting everything, Andrei burst out laughing. He realized his class-mates would be coming out, so he made for the masters' common-room to avoid meeting them. At the corner of the corridor he collided with Traian Măriеș, the greatest squealer in the whole form. The latter turned pale and tried to hurry away, but Andrei intercepted him.

"Hello, parson, how are you?"

"Alright... and what about you?" And Traian began to laugh. He had a jarring laugh like the neighing of a horse; it gave such a bad imitation of genuine merriment that Andrei could hardly refrain from punching his head.

Măriеș looked uncomfortable and was fidgeting with his Latin book. He was dressed in the same shiny black suit, threadbare and greenish at the elbows, one of priest Potra's old cassocks; underneath it he wore a thick woollen jersey made of goat's hair, showing the rumpled collar of his shirt twisted round his weedy neck, on which a big bony face with enormous jaws seemed to be screwed on. The silence between the two of them made him feel awkward, so he laughed again. His thick lips always pink and wet stretched from ear to ear in a grin showing his gums and his small, very white teeth. Andrei frowned at him.

"I say... and what are you up to?" he asked in a muffled voice.

"Oh, just learning, old chap," answered Măriеș mealy-mouthed. "My Latin... Now, don't you think Latin's splendid, old chap? *Vides ut alta stet nives candidum* *.

Andrei turned his back on him. 'They're all alike, he thought to himself revengefully. 'Just fools and Philistines... They're probably expecting I shall go down on my knees and weep!' he suddenly felt stronger than all mankind. 'I'm sure I won't lose my head. That's the main thing. Later on we'll see.'

At the door of the common-room he saw the inspector who had just come from Bucharest. He was a middle-aged, small and dumpy man with a treble chin, and was wrapped in the folds of a long and wide jacket, the height of fashion.

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* See how deep lies the pure snow

His name was Ionescu. Andrei could not remember his Christian name, but he knew that, in any case, it was historical and resounding: Hannibal or Herodot. The inspector scanned the corridor critically, examined the gold watch he produced from its leather case, coughed importantly, then entered the common-room. Andrei followed in his footsteps and remained in the antechamber. He went to the window and looked out towards the Mureş, but saw nothing. He wondered: 'Why am I nervous? Have I any hope? Still, if... No! There can be no 'if!' Now I must face the music. Otherwise they will get the better of me and will humiliate me.'

He heard the door open. He breathed deeply, but they were not calling him. It was only Mr. Corian coming out.

"What do you want?" he shouted shrilly, flying at Andrei. "Don't you know it's forbidden to enter the common-room?" Then he recognized him and subsided all of a sudden. "Oh, it's you? Just a moment, just a moment," he said politely to soothe him. (From his tone Andrei realized that all was over.)

Corian went over to the window and then into the corner where the attendance registers were kept. Without minding Andrei's presence he searched the wide and loose pockets of his green checked coat, lost his temper, muttered something, then produced with evident satisfaction from the pocket at the back of his trousers a metal flask as flat as a revolver. He unscrewed the stopper which could be used as a small tumbler and gulping down its contents he said merrily:

"That's what I usually do in the long break. My stomach is not what it should be and... A tonic!" He handed the flask to Andrei: "Won't you have some? From now on... it's all the same to you... you know — and he bent down confidently — I didn't agree in my inner self, but it looks as if your masters had never been young... Youth is romantic... If we ever meet in society, don't bear me a grudge. I — and he smiled leniently — I'm a singing master. Music... *ancilla pedagogiae*... Cheerio!"

He looked at Andrei with pity or maybe only with alcoholic emotion and entered the common-room.

Through the open door Andrei saw the horse-shoe table, the press containing the rolls and the examination papers. The hurriedly closed door dammed the wave of cigarette smoke.

The window let in the warm, almost burning hot rays of the early May sun. The door opened anew. 'Here we are. It's me they are calling!'

"Andrei Sabin is requested to come in," came the stuttering voice of the handwriting master who always offered to act as the common-room attendant.

Andrei left his empty bag on the window-sill and went in. The cut-glass door of the cupboard standing opposite the entrance reflected an unaccustomed image: a white face, dark hair falling in soft wisps around the temples, heavily ringed eyes. Quite expressionless. The very way he had wished to appear in front of them.

He had feared that on entering, all eyes would turn on him searchingly; he had been wrong, however, although the indifference with which they received him was entirely affected. Only the inspector from Bucharest examined him at length inquisitively and with evident disgust. Andrei greeted them with a bow, then stood erect, waiting. The common-room was a spacious octagonal room and, unlike the corridors with their didactic ornaments, here everything was quiet and unconspicuous like in a club patronized by distinguished men. The enormous tobacco-coloured carpet, the high windows veiled with a springtime muslin drapery, created an impression of distinction, quietude and study. A smell of tobacco and leather suggestive of men persisted in the room. As no one paid any attention to him, Andrei looked out of the window. In front of the school, the sports grounds with their dark-red colour stretched out, and in the background rose the cement dyke behind which one could see the shining green tops of the trees rising from the bank of the river Mureș. To the left, almost hidden, the zigzag ditch of the air-raid shelter looked like a common grave.

He was trying to appear quite indifferent to all that was going on in the room, but from the tail of his eye he saw the inspector bend towards Stan, the sociology master, whispering something into his ear. Stan nod-

ded, shaking his pink china head several times in approval.

"So, now..." came the thin, dry, piercing voice of Dr. Viniciu Lucaci, the headmaster. The whispering ceased, the tobacco smoke hung in a thicker cloud for a while, and Andrei felt an icy void in his chest. A cold sweat came out on his hands, and he wiped them childishly on the seat of his trousers. There was a buzzing sound in his ears, as if he were under high pressure.

He cast a quick circular glance: he was instinctively looking for allies, although he knew it was of no use. At the head of the table the headmaster was turning over some papers with a wiry yellowish hand. His silvery, formerly curly hair stood up over his forehead like a horn. He had an unexpectedly young face, still quite unwrinkled, to which black bristly eyebrows gave an expression of permanent irritation. As a matter of fact, to the boys Viniciu Lucaci had always seemed animated by a coldblooded cruelty. He had never talked to them like a parent, and his absent-mindedness was so notorious that Andrei could not refrain from checking whether the headmaster had not left his trousers unbuttoned, or his braces were not hanging down his back. This carelessness had, however, never been a matter of mockery, for Viniciu Lucaci had two ways of punishing: he either expelled you or gave you two or three good kicks in the seat of your pants.

This icy silence was lasting long and Andrei was about to lose patience. Seated uncomfortably, asymmetrically, on the corner of a chair, Iosef Drăgan, the French master, was looking at him indifferently, with round, carp-like eyes. When their eyes met, Drăgan, coughed dryly (this cough was the completing touch of his stiff mechanical dignity) and he turned towards Blaga, the geography master. The old man was engrossed in revising the contents of his pockets full of things seized from the pupils: marbles, knuckle-bones, stamps. 'I wonder what would happen if, without a word, I went out,' Andrei said to himself. Then he caught sight of Suslănescu, the history master. The latter smiled, a sad, painful smile. 'There's one who's suffering as if *he* were to blame,' Andrei thought mockingly.

The future, everything that would happen after the end of this sitting, the impotent restlessness, the dull, persisting baneful despair no longer existed for Andrei. He had not answered Suslănescu's stare; it was no use. Poor Suslănescu! He was so careful not to make a mistake, not to break any rules of decorum, not to hurt anyone! He would have liked to live in a world refined in speech at least, and to be surrounded by friends. That was why he selected the best pupil in every form, took him for walks, treated him with cakes at the confectioner's, went to the theatre with him, lent him books, and every time the pupil wrote an exceptionally good examination paper, he presented him with some valuable book bearing a ridiculously sentimental dedication signed Alexandru Suslănescu of Jumărești. He made Andrei call him by his Christian name when they were alone. Suslănescu was twenty-six. His friendship had been precious to Andrei: it had raised his self-esteem, for the teacher was a delicate, refined and learned person possessing a vast knowledge of what is usually called *la petite histoire.* Now, however, he did not care about Suslănescu. That was why he avoided his gaze. 'A coward,' was the label he angrily affixed to him.

With obvious satisfaction mitigated by a canonical rebuke, Ioachim Potra, the Greek-Catholic priest and Latin master, was nodding. His eyes were shining brightly, and a very deep vertical crease separated his eyebrows. 'There's one at least, who won't mince matters regarding my case,' said Andrei to himself. 'He has, moreover, often warned me: So everyting is all right. *Quiquid agis prudenter agas et respice finem*' * — he remembered his favourite saying. Despicable Jesuitism. 'Why don't they begin? I wish it were over.'

Răducanu was examining a smaller portrait of the patron, representing him as a young man this time. He was holding his hands behind his back, and cracking his fingers; he then turned round suddenly. He was pale and nervous, but when he met Andrei's glance, he smiled a broad smile, as broad as he could manage, and lifted up his hands clasped in a boxer's salute. Andrei felt his heart

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* Do all you do cautiously and never lose sight of the end

flooded with a strange joy. He would have liked Răducanu to be nearer him.

Viniciu Lucaci rose from his chair, took up a paper and began in a hoarse voice:

"Subsequent to our yesterday afternoon's conference, we have assembled here in order to inform Andrei Sabin, the 7th-form pupil — he is still a pupil — of the conclusions we have reached."

His thin pale lips began to tremble and then something quite unexpected happened: the headmaster began to shout. They all turned towards him, startled. Suslănescu's bluish eyelids fluttered quickly. Drăgan's hand holding a cigarette stopped in the air, and Father Crăioc wriggled dumbfounded on his chair, making it creak.

"You scoundrel," roared Lucaci unable to control himself any longer. "You're nothing but a scoundrel! What came over you? Why did you do it? Just tell me, why? You, one of the most brilliant pupils of the school... What was in your mind? Has your father an estate, that he can keep you? As far as I know, he's a simple railway worker. He has saved and scraped to keep you at school and buy your books, you silly fool!"

"Mr. Lucaci..." interposed the inspector, suggesting his speaking in a more civilized tone.

"Yes!" shouted Lucaci, crumpling up the papers lying on the table. The inspector, terrified at the thought that the *corpus delicti* might be destroyed, leaned over and took them away gingerly out of the headmaster's reach. "What came over you? What on all the earth? Come on, speak up!" The corners of Lucaci's mouth sagged as if they were struggling to keep back tears of irritation. At this unexpected outburst Andrei could hear the beating of his heart as in a deep silence. "What'll you do now? Where 'll you go? Go and be a petty clerk? You, one of the school's best pupils!" he bawled turning a little towards Drăgan.

"A good pupil," the latter said curtly. And he completed to himself: *'N'est-ce pas?'*

"If you'd only have kept them at home! But you had to read them in the class-room, to make a show of them... Why did you make a show of them?"

'You too were a freemason, everybody knows it,' Andrei thought, but he replied foolishly:

"I don't know."

"You don't, do you," muttered Father Crăioc... "He doesn't know ... My boy, I whose son Mihail Dante fell at the Don bend..."

He stopped. Tears came to his eyes. The inspector pounced upon the occasion and, feigning a boundless indignation, interrupted the flow of Lucaci's shouts:

"Look here, Sabin, the grief of a father ought to make you think of the outrageousness of what you have committed. How could you, a young Rumanian, do such things that only a Jew, yes a Jew, could take the liberty of doing? To read, in class, yes in class, those... pages..."

Andrei was no longer listening. The blood had risen to his face and he felt very warm. Those pages... God, how often during the nights of this last week he had been hoping! If the school burnt down, if Lucaci lost the copy-book, if it all were only... Why had he done it?

"Now, when our *nation* is engaged in the grandest... hm... yes, in the throes of the grandest fight known in history... When the imperative of the present hour orders us to forget our private interests, instead of attending to your studies, you started to..."

The inspector stopped, all in a sweat, pulled his white handkerchief from his breast-pocket, but remembering he had another that he had used before, put it back and mopped the perspiration off his brow with the palm of his hand, like a tired porter.

"You, Andrei..."

"Would you mind not calling me by my Christian name!" came Andrei's suddenly changed voice.

The geographer stopped his reckonings and stared at him. Răducanu smiled again, a broad encouraging smile. The headmaster was tapping the table with his fingers, absent-mindedly. Nonplussed, inspector Ionescu sat there gaping. His puffy cheeks became scarlet, he gulped, then went on in an extremely calm tone:

"We have unanimously agreed to see to it that your deed, Sabin, should have no disagreeable consequences, considering you are a Rumanian."

Andrei leaned against the wall, aghast. With the palms of his hands spread out, he touched the smooth wet wall with his fingers. His lips began to tremble.

"Don't make fun of the child," said Father Potra with extreme kindness. "Andrei, you have been expelled from all the schools in the country, the inspector just meant to say..."

"I meant to say," growled the inspector under his breath, "that we didn't want to ruin your life, trying to find out where you got those ideas from. *I* think your father, a simple-minded person, as I have been told, could not have inculcated upon you such 'theories.' We have gathered that he is a good Rumanian, a conscientious and unassuming employee."

'Poor, poor Andrei,' Suslănescu was saying to himself pityingly ... 'My poor, dear little boy... The warm, *naïve* and gallant humanitarian heroism of eighteen!'

"Sorry to interrupt you," said the sociologist rising to his feet. He surveyed the room carefully, then, catching sight of Răducanu, started as if he hadn't noticed him before... "Immediately after the 'Sabin case' had been discovered, I was conferred the dignity of form-master to the 7th form which up to that time had been under Mr. Răducanu's guidance. What a sad discovery I made! Such liberalism, such corruption... Mr. Răducanu is a Darwinist... Far be it from me to deny Mr. Răducanu's merits and studies. I wouldn't think of doing it. France... France, we all know..."

"Yes!" called out Father Crăioc. "Yes, yes! For instance, Sabin once asked me: 'Doesn't God look like the Pithecanthropus erectus? He ought to, if we admit he created man after his likeness.' "

"Your Reverence's interruption encourages me," Stan went on, blushing with pleasure. "I'd like to ask Mr. Răducanu to say a few words, that is, if inspector Ionescu has nothing against it. What does Mr. Răducanu think of Sabin's 'paper'?"

"Yes, let us hear what he has to say," the inspector assented.

They all turned round to look at Răducanu. He took a step forward. His voice was shaking:

"I should have spoken even without your most welcome invitation... *'camarad'* * Stan!"

"Ah!" said the inspector.

Everyone knew that Stan had been a 'legionary,' still, nothing had happened to him after the rebellion,** for he had an influential protector who was on good terms with Miţa Antonescu. Stan turned pale.

"Have you never been young?" shouted Răducanu. "Have you never felt the noble impulses of youth? Has nothing ever stirred you? Have you never had impulses, aspirations?"

"Of course, we've had them, but not anti-Rumanian ones!" said Stan sharply.

"If the craving for freedom is an anti-Rumanian aspiration..." said Răducanu curtly. The inspector began to wriggle on his chair. "And moreover," Răducanu went on, walking along the carpet, "don't the questions that disturb Andrei, that brilliant pupil of our school, disturb you too, gentlemen? You, sir! And you, Mr. Suslănescu! Mr. Blaga! Father Potra! In our talks, haven't some of you expressed certain opinions? Of course, if you cannot answer, if you dare not do it, remember it is, however, honest, youthful and romantic to refuse a compromise with your own conscience."

"That's enough!" said Ionescu jumping to his feet on the verge of apoplexy. "Enough! I realize there is not one Sabin case only, in this school. When we finish, we shall talk about Mr. Răducanu too. Most likely, when he was in Paris, he was influenced by the speeches of Messrs. Blum, Mandel and other *pur sang* Frenchmen. He turned to Andrei.

"I could give you examples from the history of this nation..."

"You need not trouble," said Andrei softly. "I possess a certain amount of historical knowledge."

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* The members of the Rumanian fascist Iron Guard, known as "legionaries," addressed one another as "camarad".

** In January 1941 the Iron Guard which had supported Marshal Antonescu's government tried a putsch — the so-called rebellion — which, with the aid of the army and Hitler's backing, was crushed by Marshal Antonescu who thenceforward set up a dictatorship that lasted up to August 23rd, 1944

The inspector guessed rather than heard the words, from the movements of Andrei's lips. He went on in a cold fury:

"Mr. Sabin, the strength of this nation lies in the fact that it has always rallied its ranks closely, in the dramatic moments of its existence, that it has been able to disregard its own self. We are living one of those dramatic moments!" he exclaimed, lifting up his arms.

"It is not my fault," murmured Andrei.

"Consequently, to shorten this scene, painful for us too, I've got to tell you that you have been expelled from all the schools in the country, and for ever, on account of your political views and political agitation contrary to the school rules in force. Politics and education, Mr. Sabin, are two incompatible notions!"

That very moment a frightfully loud buzzing of airplanes was heard, and immediately after the hooter on the school-roof started its plaintive, nerve-racking wailing. It was a quarter past one.

Ionescu stepped back with a short groan. The chair he had kicked fell down noiselessly on the carpet. With unexpected swiftness Father Crăioc was the first to reach the door; he opened it with a jerk and screamed: "To the shelter!" From the ground floor came the maddening and desperate jingle of the bell which Oancea was ringing with all his might. Quite regardless of one another, the masters rushed to the door, all at a time, jostling one another, trying to elbow their way out. Through the open window came the town's roar of terror: the hooters on the roof of the prefecture, the townhall and the Palace of Culture were wailing: ah — oo — ah — ah — oh — oh — ah — oo — oo — oo... A car hooting incessantly passed like a flash, booming with its exhaust wide open. The common-room door was blocked up by Crăioc and Blaga who both wanted to get out at the same time. Behind them pressed the others, dumb with fear. Then Ionescu dashed forward head foremost like a ram, butting into Crăioc's loins with his forehead. From the passage came the sound of footsteps and the screams of the pupils.

"Single file!" shouted Lucaci dashing in among the swarming children at the door, catching hold of their shoulders or of their coat-skirts. "Let each of the

class-masters go to their forms! Look sharp, damn you!"

Andrei was still standing against the wall. Passing by him, Suslănescu caught him by the hand, calling out in a shrill voice:

"Come to the shelter, Andrei!"

The door gave way from its hinges, and the masters tumbled into the antechamber. Ionescu was bellowing: "Where's the shelter? Is it of concrete?"

"Come on, Andrei," said Suslănescu, his face livid, dragging him along.

Andrei followed him mechanically. Along the passages the children were flying to the exit. Caught up, lost among them, the masters were following Crăioc.

"Order! Quiet!" Lucaci was shouting.

Like a disordely mob, the crowd rushed down the stairs. Andrei, whose arm Suslănescu was holding tight, lagged behind. He was walking unnaturally slowly, feeling for every step as the blind do. Hanging on to the bell rope, Oancea never stopped tugging at it. As the masters passed by, hurrying towards the main entrance, he screamed something; seeing that no one heard him, he made a rapid movement with his left hand, while his right one kept pulling at the rope: ding-dong! ding-dong!

Pushed along, almost carried, Father Crăioc squeezed his belly against the big, heavy, carved door... He groaned, turned purple, then tried to make way for himself with his behind, so as to open the gate. But the children kept pressing, and the priest's efforts to free himself were paralysed.

"Make room!... Make room!..." he panted.

"To the shelter!"

"Where's the shelter?" said Ionescu sputtering and foaming.

From behind there came the sound of a broken bottle.

"Ooooh!" wailed a child.

"The door's locked," shouted Oancea hanging on the rope which had given way. The bell fell clanging on the cement floor.

Lucaci, left behind in the crush, boxed some boys' ears right and left without stopping on his way, then fumbled

in his pockets and produced a small rusty key. He pushed Crăioc away from the door, opened it and disappeared, carried away by the stream of children who had burst out into the street. The fierce light dazzled them. They stamped across the road, towards the shelter.

"Where's Dan?" wondered Andrei who began to call: "Dan! Dan!"

"I'm here," came the calm voice of his cousin from behind.

Quite composed, with his spectacles raised on his high and bulging forehead, Dan was carrying some eight satchels. He winked jocularly and did not hurry. When he reached the street, at the same time as Andrei and Suslănescu, he stopped, sheltered his eyes with his hand and scanned the disquieting, clear sky.

"What the devil is the matter? Don't they pass here every day?" he muttered.

"Get into the shelter!" called Corian to them from the door, gesticulating quite unconcerned with his metal flask.

"There they are!" stated Dan, lifting his hand. "There they are!"

The buzzing sound grew louder: a few silvery flickerings flashed for an instant in the sun.

"Boys, it's dangerous!" Suslănescu whimpered. 'The squirts,' he thought, 'they're just pretending they're not scared to death.'

A lorry came from round the corner. It swerved, was about to skid, then rushed straight at the group of three standing motionless in the middle of the pavement. Andrei dragged Dan along and they both ran to the shelter.

In the dug-out made by youths during their pre-military service it was stifling. Andrei edged his way in among the children pressed close to the walls from which clods of earth were slipping down with a light rustling noise. 'I must get near them,' he said to himself. The masters had crowded at the far end of the shelter and were waiting. Andrei noticed that fear had made their faces look grotesque, like masks. The flabby flesh on Ionescu's face was trembling like jelly. He was choking. He loosened his shirt collar. A small mother-of-pearl button cracked and fell

off with a jerk, like some insect. Andrei bent down, picked it up and handed it to the inspector.

"Thanks," stammered the latter. "Many, many thanks... I wonder..." And he fell silent.

The stuttering voice of Father Crăioc was chanting:

"O Lord and Master of my life, Thou spirit of Truth, who art everywhere and doest everything..."

Father Potra was holding Traian Măriеş close to him. Traian's thick lips had gone white, and his Adam's apple was rising and falling jerkily. Potra stroked the boy's stiff hair with his thin fingers:

"Come now, don't be frightened, my dear boy!"

"Mother!" a small first-form boy began to cry.

"Hush!" Lucaci snapped. "Hush, for God's sake!"

The child was cowed and swallowed up his tears.

Andrei leant against the rough uneven wall. He was not afraid. Besides, everything that had happened that day was so unreal. He only wanted Ionescu to be unable to take his eyes off him, so he coughed a couple of times.

"They're flying over the station!" somebody outside called out.

The drone of the planes was heard clearly now, as though above their heads. The inspector covered his face with his hands.

"Are you afraid, sir?" Andrei asked, but the inspector could not hear, for at that very moment, the anti-aircraft guns in the old fort started firing.

Andrei turned pale. Could it really be a bombardment? In fact, American planes had been going by every day, coming from the oil-wells and heading for Debreczen. It seemed as though the town was to be spared. To avoid irritating the enemy, the anti-aircraft guns never fired. And now...

Quite unexpectedly Father Crăioc began to weep. He sobbed repeatedly, saying amid his tears:

"Why this, when my son Mihail Dante died... and now..."

"Shut up!" ordered the headmaster. "Shut up, man!"

Even more terrified now by the priest's tears, the children started shrieking. Andrei made for the exit.

"Where are you going?" Suslănescu asked.

"Outside."

"Andrei!" Elbowing his way, Răducanu came up to him. He put his arms round him and said in a shaky voice: "Do nothing rash, Andrei. Stay here... All this will blow over! To be patient is also a form of courage... My dear boy..."

"I must get out!"

He tore himself away and, tramping on the other boys' feet, went out, after pushing aside Drăgan who had been standing rooted to the soil in the middle of the shelter, with his elbows wide apart, like a mannequin. Dan was on his knees behind a bush of box-wood, looking at the sky with eyes wide open. When he saw Andrei, he whispered hoarsely:

"Look!"

A silvery plane had swooped down very low above the station; behind it there floated a long wake of thick grey smoke, unusually straight, like a carefully drawn line.

"Hit?" asked Andrei.

"No. It's locating the station."

The small cotton-wool clouds of the anti-aircraft explosions dotted the sky. The airplane turned: the smoke broke rectangularly.

Flying in fives, the airplanes made their appearance exactly above the smoke rectangle; they looked like silvery scales.

A wild rumbling was filling the sky, a tongue of fire leapt up very high, together with coils of black smoke. The earth began to shake. Andrei could hear nothing now. He saw only the first squadron pass smoothly over the town, then another appeared. Huge flames gushed out; a three-storeyed building sank slowly to the ground, leaving in its stead a cloud of whitish dust.

Above the station and the railway carriage works a rolling cloud would tear up into shreds, pierced now and again by sharp jets of white flame. The bombs kept falling. A long whistling sound was heard, then came a short, weighty silence followed suddenly by an unbearable detonation. Andrei saw a tall tree rise into the air, then fall and disappear behind the blazing roofs. They were bombarding the park too. That is where the main shelter of the railway officials and workers' district was.

"There... father is there!" said Andrei with a shudder.

He leapt to his feet, and his eyes searched for the building of the railway offices, but could not see it. At the place where it had stood, a huge ball of flames and smoke was foaming. Andrei felt so giddy that he was about to fall down. He leaned against Dan's shoulder. The latter looked up at him with large, troubled eyes:

"Uncle Octavian!"

"I'm going there," said Andrei in a strangled voice.

"Come on!" said Dan rising heavily.

"No!" panted Andrei. "I'm going alone... you go home. Tell mother... everything... is alright."

A tremendous clap deafened them. Dan squeezed his hand.

"And what about you?"

"I've been expelled... I'm off." And he started running across the sports ground.

He jumped over the wire-netting fence, starting at a gallop along the deserted boulevard. He heard the shrill whistle of a policeman behind him, but did not stop. His forehead, his face were covered with sweat; he felt it running down his back, burning hot. He choked and started coughing. The air was full of small moths of black ashes. He gazed at his hands. They were black. He felt he had to go on. Not stopping to think, he climbed up the dyke. This way he would be able to enter the station. He had to get there!

His heated lungs were breathing with difficulty. Down, by the Mureş, under the willows, men in shirt-sleeves and women in dressing-gowns were lying on their bellies. "I have to get there!" There was a drumming sound in his ears. Continuing his mad flight, he looked up at the black sky. The airplanes had disappeared. Some shell, fired at random, was bursting like a cotton ball. The airplanes had left... What if they returned? What time could it be?

He stumbled against a stone and fell down full length. His palms were smarting and a sharp pain shot through his knees. He ran his fingers down his legs hurriedly — his trousers were torn and blood was running from his leg. He gave a short whimper, as he could hardly stand the pain. Summoning

up all his strength, he started at a run again and hurried down the dyke, along a small street leading to the main road. At the corner he stopped, exhausted, and, leaning against a wall, took off his coat.

In front of him, the station, the apprentices' new hostel and the railway offices were burning, wrapped in a thick curtain of smoke. Buznea's shop had collapsed. The façade of the bus station had vanished. And he could walk no further. His legs began to wobble. 'Father is there,' he thought feverishly. He no longer recognized the district: the crumbled-down houses were only mounds of bricks; the Astoria Hotel, sliced in two, looked like a piece of stage scenery with its rooms painted coarsely in pale blue, pink and yellow; a table was hanging from a balcony-railing now red-hot because of the fire. He started at a run down the middle of the street leading to the station. He jumped over the telegraph wires coiled in the middle of the road, avoiding the telegraph poles that lay across the street.

Suddenly, three hundred yards to the left, a house blew up. The blast of the bomb threw Andrei to the ground, face downwards. He tossed about two or three times, quite dazed. Rubble and dust had got into his mouth. He lay as he was, his face close to the dry, burning-hot soil. When he rose on all-fours, stunned, he saw how the perspiration on his face had left the outline of his profile in the dust. Staggering and dragging his feet, he again began to run. Feeling utterly helpless, he actually wept. He heard, coming from the other street, the hooting of an emergency ambulance; then the air-raid hooters whistled announcing the end of the alarm. A long, even, monotone sound.

'I must get there before the police block the entrance to the station,' said Andrei to himself, tensely. What foolish thoughts! As if they hadn't other more important things to think of! It seemed strange not to meet anyone, but turning round he saw in a small flower-garden — the only thing left of a small red-roofed house covered with ivy — an old woman lying dead. She was curled up like a snail, her head lying on her sunken chest, one leg bent the wrong way, looking immeasurably long. He started

and went nearer, unwittingly, but did not dare enter the small garden. The now bluish smoke hurt his throat.

He looked around. The street had filled with people: a middle - aged man, his shirt black with soot, was tearing his hair. "Sidi! Sidi!" he kept calling, not knowing where to go. Quilts and pillows were being thrown out of the window of a house, and feathers were flying out of them all over the place; a little girl, her forehead covered with scratches, was sucking her crushed thumb... A cab turned upside down, with its wheels uppermost, was blocking the street. The horse was lying in a pool of blood, and the cabby was cursing it because it wouldn't get up. The roof of a house on Andrei's right collapsed in a shower of sparks; far away, beyond the railway shifting station, a few oil tanks exploded. Andrei passed among the crowd, like drunk. He caught only snatches of words. Everyone was shouting...

"Mrs. Marinescu's dead... there in the courtyard... with the children..."

"Where's mother?"

"...thank God, we..."

"When the alarm was sounded..."

"Gligore! Who's seen Gligore?"

"I didn't go into the shelter. That's just where it fell..."

An icy claw was tearing at his bowels. He passed before a dug-out on which a bomb had exploded. A battered bush was shaking its small leaves bespattered with blood, and from under it showed the small torn boot of a child, and further away, rolling in the dust, the head of a fair woman.

From the adjacent gardens there floated hot waves of smoke, the bark of the trees crackled repeatedly, a man with singed hair, eyebrows and moustache sat dazed in the middle of the road, tying up the laces of his boots. Someone seized Andrei by the shoulder:

"Come... to the cellar... I must get them out..."

Andrei felt quite done up and kept repeating to himself, moving his lips:

"Father's in the station, father's in the station..."

"What is it you're saying?"

"Nothing!"

"Hurry up!" cried the man who was holding him tight by the sleeve. "Don't you hear?"

"Where to?"

"Come... come... for God's sake!"

He hadn't the power to offer any resistance.

"Here... quite near... a few steps..." the man was moaning, making wide gestures.

"I'm not going!" said Andrei wrenching himself away from the man's grasp. "Father's in the station! Don't you understand?"

He hurried away, followed by curses. Smarting with the heat and the smoke, his eyes were full of tears. He had rubbed them with his dirty hands, and now they were stinging. A damp, smelly vapour hit him in the face: he slipped down a slope and found himself up to the knees in a greenish, sticky puddle. He clambered out of it and saw he was in front of the station. Here the bombs had fallen close to one another. Andrei trod on bits of broken glass, broken bricks, boards, bits of china, cloths, glowing-hot shrapnels with indented edges. Of all the station one single high wall had been left standing, covered with a black metal tracery on the top of it. All the rest was hidden by smoke.

'Where shall I get in?' he was wondering desperately. Now he was sure his father was dead.

He found a place where, through a breach in the wall, he caught a glimpse of the platform. A passenger train stopping in the station during the raid had been hurled off the rails: travelling bags, bits of iron, wheels, people's hands and legs were scattered about topsy-turvy.

"Hey, where are you going?" he heard someone call to him, but he did not turn round. He put his handkerchief over his mouth, closed his eyes and dashed through the breach.

"Halt!" came a hoarse shout and something whistled past his ear.

He had been here so often, but could not recognize anything in the place. The inside stairs, half consumed by the fire, were bent in the void; a rafter fell from the top, booming. Andrei turned back quite stunned. A black acrid smoke was rising from the ruins. Knocking against stones, tables,

broken chairs, he felt he was going to collapse; he, however, made a last effort and rushed straight ahead. A strong jet of water hit him in the face, compelling him to step back. He fell on his knees, blinded, but immediately leapt up. In front of him, a fireman was splashing him with his hose.

"Your clothes were on fire!"

"Were they?"

Firemen were lined up along the platform, needlessly throwing water on the remains of the station. A half-burnt poster hung crookedly on the wall, representing an S. S. soldier in a camouflage tunic, standing against the ruins of a town.

All over the place glass reduced to small particles creaked under the feet. The post-parcel van stood untouched, loaded with travelling-bags, cases, bales. Beside it, lying on his back, was a dead railway official, his arms stretched crosswise, his gaping mouth full of clotted blood. Andrei went up to him. He recognized him. It was Vodă, a junior clerk of Office II. Andrei used to call on him often. And now he was dead! He stood there for a long time, his arms hanging limp, unable to take his eyes off Vodă's corpse. His blue uniform had several tears, and below his chest a brown pool of blood had formed. Andrei turned round and saw Orban, the station-master, among the firemen. Coatless, his shirt sleeves rolled up, he was making jerky movements, pointing to where the hose should be directed. Andrei ran up to him and caught his arm:

"Where's father?"

"What?" asked Orban bewildered; then, with a twitch which moved half of his face up, he asked stupidly: "How are you?... Oh! Your father? Yes, the station's burnt down. I was right inside at the time, and yet I managed to escape. He's there in the warehouse," he added quickly. "You'll find him there. He too is safe. We've escaped, all of us," he repeated, then bent down and covered his face with his hands.

He went on muttering, but Andrei did no longer hear him. Walking unsteadily, he made for the storehouse, whose yellow-grey wall showed now and then through the screen of smoke that was trailing above the platforms.

He couldn't get there, however; the suspension bridge that crossed the railway lines had broken down and was blocking his way. He had to jump over the rails, walk round a goods-wagon full of wired hen-coops. The shells had torn away the wires, and small, white Leghorn hens were cackling among the wheels. Here the dead lay in heaps all over the place, one on top of the other. He was struck by the lustreless nakedness of the body of a big strong woman, lying on her belly, her frock gathered up and wrapped round her head.

Some wagons had climbed upon others. Around them, in the most unexpected positions, were strewn about passengers, engine-drivers, a German soldier seated as if he were about to fire. Heaps of trifles had fallen out of travelling-bags that had burst open: a shaving-kit, neckties, a book with its pages torn out. From the warehouse, still wrapped in smoke, he heard a familiar voice:

"Not there, you blockhead! Over there! There is oom enough, I tell you!"

"Why, Mr. Sabin, but..."

"Mind you take hold of it well, Pantea, or I'll box your ears. Not like that!"

"Father!" cried Andrei joyfully. 'Father's directing!'

Not heeding where he set his foot, he dashed forward, went round an engine lying upside down, with the boiler cracked in several places, letting out waves of whitish steam. Then he caught sight of his father: short, stout, his sparse hair sticking to his sweating forehead, he was gesticulating wildly. All the parcels had been tidily arranged close to the warehouse wall, and a young official, frantic with fear, had climbed up on to the top of the heap from where he was calling out:

"Mr. Sabin, we'd better phone! Please, don't let's take the responsibility! Let's phone! Please!"

Sabin frowned, irritated, but presently went up to a young lady who was dragging along a yellow pigskin travelling-bag, while with her other hand she was holding up her silk stocking which had got out of the suspender.

"Take a seat, madam, the doctor'll be here presently."

"Father!" cried Andrei rushing up to him. Octavian Sabin folded him in his arms, astounded to see him.

"What are you doing here?" he faltered. "What are you doing here, sonny?"

"I came to... to..."

He could not go on. The old man, freshly-shaven, smelt of Eau-de-Cologne and of plum-brandy, and this reminded Andrei — so very out of keeping with the place they were in — of the late evenings when his father used to come home a little tipsy, trying to hide the fact under a shower of excuses: he had met an inspector from Cluj and they had had a drink... 'Just one small drink, mother, upon my word...' Then he would produce two pounds of tangerines: 'There you are, Andrei, they're for you.'

"What are you doing here," muttered the old man. "Were you anxious about your father? Don't you know father cannot die?"

"Mr. Sabin!" somebody called. "Hey, Mr. Sabin! There's a little girl here!"

Andrei tore himself away from his father's embrace and looked down at him. The old man was almost a head shorter than his son. He then asked, trying to appear calm:

"Now then, can I be of any help here?" Suddenly in alarm again: "What about home? Mother will..."

"Don't worry. I sent someone to let mother know that everything was alright."

"Then..." said Andrei, sticking out his chest.

"Come along with father. We've got some work to do."

They both set off, going round the warehouse. Meanwhile Sabin was saying to him:

"I told them: don't you worry, they cannot kill us. They went to the shelter, the very place that was bombarded." Then he frowned when he caught sight of Caba, a very stout, toothless and bald man, who was running towards them.

"Now, what's up, man?"

"Mr. Sabin, there is a little girl there... and... Good morning, master Andrei," he shouted grinning. "You see, we're safe. If we hadn't listened to your worthy father, the inspector, we should not have been alive now... There's a little girl," he added, "and she refuses to move."

The child was standing between the twisted lines, weeping. Sabin went up and squatted in front of her.

"What's the matter with you, Missie?"

"Father!" cried the little girl. "I want my father!"

Sabin lifted her up in his arms. Turning to Andrei, his face distorted by fury, he said between clenched teeth:

"May God dam them, the curs!" He went on, in a changed tone: "Just you wait darling, we'll find your father for you. Come along with uncle now."

Andrei was tramping behind his father, feeling out of the picture. Seeing Caba push a truck full of travelling-bags, he went and helped him.

"What a father you've got!" said Caba admiringly. "The essence of kindness and so brave! When the planes started roaring, we almost befouled our pants. I mean the greenhorns. Your father and I didn't, no, we didn't. We pricked up our ears and said: 'It's going to be hot!' 'Don't go and hide in a hole,' said Mr. Sabin, 'for it's them they're looking for.' And I didn't. The bombs started whizzing. I crossed myself, but wasn't frightened, not in the least. I fought at Piave where I was buried by a shell. Then the ground began to quake, and the parcels started jumping up and down... See, my legs got caught in the rail!"

Andrei crept under the wagon and hoisted it up with his shoulder. The pain he felt did him good. Caba went on with his story, while they were going round the warehouse.

"After that I don't know what happened. I seemed to have gone deaf. When I crept out from under the desk, Mr. Sabin, as white as a sheet of paper, handed me a bottle of spirits: 'There, drink it, man — he said — I see you're almost faint!' 'I'm sorry, Mr. Sabin,' I said, then I drank. And when he started yelling at all those greenhorns, they stood at attention. Nowadays, men working for the State Railways aren't what they used to be! Oh dear, oh dear, what a terrible number of dead...! Here we are... you see, so I wasn't frightened."

After that Andrei no longer realized how time passed. He was tramping between the lines, picking up parcels or travelling-bags and piling them up on a porter's truck

which he pushed as far as the warehouse platform, where a fair-haired young man with an incipient baldness wrote them down on a long list, giving each a number which he then scribbled on the bag with blue chalk. Andrei would say to himself after every transport: 'This is the last one,' but he went back time and again. The stretcher-bearers were swarming about the station, climbing into the broken railway carriages, and bringing out the dead. The wide platform with its yellow tiled floor was covered with corpses lined up like in a morgue. Groups of soldiers were going about with detecting machines to discover unexploded bombs. From the other side of the station, the residential quarter of the town, carriages and carts were coming down, and men on foot, carrying their belongings. They left behind them crumbled-down walls blackened by smoke, gardens laid waste, vineyards with their props torn out. Andrei saw them flow down towards the town, till late in the evening. He was so tired that he could hardly keep awake. He went on pushing his truck, without looking where he was treading. Every time he met his father, the latter would say sternly:

"It's time to go home, Andrei. I'll be coming too, right away."

After a time he began to think:

'And what if they've expelled me? Maybe I ought to tell father. No! This would be more terrible for him than the bombardment or the feeling that everything may begin all over again tomorrow. Funny! We two talk so little and still get on well. It is generally said that fathers are fonder of... Nonsense... Now I've got to push this truck with God only knows whose things.'

When he got to the platform, he stopped short. A long row of Mercedes motor-cars were parked festively in a semicircle, respectfully watched by policemen in full-dress uniform, wearing funny Prussian helmets with a brass point sparkling at the top. Andrei recognized General Belega, the district prefect, a tall man in a tight-fitting uniform, with a Sam Browne and other leather straps across his chest. He had walked a few steps away from the station and, with his hands behind his back, was staring at the disaster, puckering his lips and making a whistling sound.

'They might notice I've been doing voluntary work,' thought Andrei, 'and then... Again? What would Lucian say, if he got to know of those dreadful thoughts of mine?'

His wounded knee hurt him badly. He touched it gently with his fingers, then entered the storehouse limping. It was almost dark inside, and all the window-panes were broken. On the tables and desks wounded people were groaning; the lady with the torn stocking was talking all by herself, making elegant gestures, and the little girl with the pink frock had fallen asleep, her mouth wide open. In the middle of the storeroom, her father and the others were sitting on the floor around a newspaper spread like a table-cloth, eating bread and sausage.

"There you are, at last," said Sabin motioning to him to come and sit by him. "We've done our best."

"Orban went mad with fear, Mr. Sabin," said Caba laughing and opening wide his tobacco-stained mouth. "The devil take him. He's walking up and down the platform, making speeches."

"There, have some!" said Sabin to Andrei, handing him a large slice of home-made bread with thin slices of peppery Transylvanian sausage that he had cut with his pocket-knife. "I'm starving!"

"Allow me, sir," said the smart lady jumping to her feet and hurrying to open her travelling bag. Her fingers could not do it, and she broke the cherry-coloured nail of her little finger. She exclaimed softly, then made a new effort, opened the lid and produced a bottle of brandy.

"Allow me to offer you some of this. You've been wonderful!"

Sabin puffed out his chest, took the bottle, bowed, put it to his mouth and took a draught.

"That's liqueur brandy!" he said knowingly.

"Quite." Then the lady pursed her lips and moaned gracefully. "I'm afraid I've got my hair burnt."

"To the roots!" confirmed Caba. "But it will grow again..."

"I saw a blinding flame, then felt an extraordinary heat around my temples and I covered my head with my

coat. That's all the bombarment was for me," she said indifferently.

"It doesn't matter," said Caba nodding, whilst chewing heartily. "Thank God it was no worse."

'How strange all this was,' said Andrei to himself wonderingly. 'They got off safely, then, after the raid, carried parcels, and now they were eating.'

His father handed him another slice.

"Aren't we going home?" whispered Andrei.

"I can't go yet. We've got to wait for orders. But you can go."

"No, I..."

"Now don't annoy father!... But who the devil are those people?"

In the doorway there appeared the tall figure of the prefect, followed by the mayor and by a train of officers. Orban, the station-master, had put his red cap on the top of his head, but had forgotten to don his tunic. His shirt was in tatters and it had lost all its buttons, while a leg of his trousers was ripped right down.

The men leapt to their feet, choking with the unchewed bits of food in their mouths. The prefect cast a circular glance, thrust his hand in the button-hole of his coat and blinked, irritated by the darkness of the place.

"Yes, it's all right. There's order here."

"Allow me to report," said Caba with his hands on the red band of his trousers and sticking out his belly. "All the parcels have been saved."

"Alright, alright..."

The prefect shook his hand solemnly. He was at a loss what to do. He was quite dazed and realized that people were aware of it. All connections with Bucharest had been cut off, and the rescue teams sent out along the line hadn't done anything so far. He had not the slightest idea what measures to take. The hospitals were full and the wounded lay in the passages, on the steps and in the streets. A few moments earlier, a delegation of priests of the "Sapienţa" quarter had caught up with him to ask permission to open a subscription, as their church had collapsed because of the blast of the bombs. His wife had gone rabid with fear and had taken up her abode in his office and kept talking

on and on like a lunatic. The prefect was wondering where he could go after leaving the station and why he had come here at all. One of his top-boots, which he had put on in a hurry was hurting his ankle terribly.

"Gentlemen," he said taking one step forward, "the country is grateful to you. We..."

He stopped, bent his head, and his embarrassment was of greater effect than all the words he could have uttered. Being aware of it, he raised his clenched fist to the ceiling on which the smoke had made fantastic designs, and said gnashing his teeth:

"The scoundrels..." After a short pause he smiled a grieved smile. "Your mission is over, for today. Pickets of soldiers have been posted everywhere, so there is no danger. Will you please," he said addressing the station-master, "let me have the list of all those who have worked with abnegation. Once again, I thank you from all my heart!"

He shook hands with everyone, then turned on his heels and went out, his spurs making silvery clinking sounds. Outside he could not help sighing with relief. He turned to his A.D.C., whose childish face expressed keen despair restrained soldier-like, and looked at him interrogatively, as if to say:

"Where do we go next?"

"School N° 5 has been demolished by a bomb," answered the A.D.C., turning over the pages of a note-book bound in khaki leather.

The prefect again made a whistling sound, put on his kid gloves and shrugged his shoulders resignedly. He cast another glance at the station and caught sight of a big square paper stuck on the remnants of the wall, bearing in red letters:

ATTENTION!

In accordance with order No 38,592/1943, issued by the Leader of the State, Marshal Ion Antonescu, anyone caught plundering in the bombarded areas will be

Shot!

In order to avoid accidents, the proprietors or tenants of damaged houses are likewise not entitled to remove any-

thing from those houses, except in the presence of the authorities.

Dr. David Chidioşanu
Mayor

General Laurenţiu Belega
Prefect

"Fine!" said the general nodding. "See that this is posted up conspicuously all over the place! Where's the mayor?"

The mayor, dressed in black and wearing a bowler hat and white cotton gloves, was talking to a few citizens. He was an ex-police-officer and there was something irritatingly vulgar about his appearance. Seeing the prefect was waiting for him, he called out hoarsely:

"We'll do all that's necessary!" and got into the car, careful of his bowler hat.

The cars slid away gracefully, while the crowd stood gaping, choking with the pungent smoke of the petrol.

"Let's go too," said Sabin.

Only now did his face show his fatigue. With slow movements he took off his old-fashioned four button coat which he wore at his work, saw that his Omega watch was in its place, shook hands with his colleagues and, turning to Andrei, asked:

"Where's your coat?"

"I've lost it!"

He felt childishly guilty: he knew they were hard-up for money. His father guessed his embarrassment and waved it aside but not sincerely.

"Lucky we got out of it safely. Let's go."

They set off slowly. Andrei could hardly walk. Evening was coming on and there wasn't even the slightest breeze. The long sheets of smoke hung down from somewhere above, like ragged curtains. From time to time the blue of the May sky would show through them. Andrei recognized nothing: the quarter looked like a picture called up by a war paper. Regardless of the prefect's order, people were searching among the ruins, collecting their belongings. Along the pavement stood iron stoves as full of holes as sieves, undone bedsteads, tables with broken legs, cup-

boards with their doors open. A woman was wandering aimlessly, clutching at her frock with both hands and asking in a voice scarcely audible with so much weeping: "Haven't you seen my daughter Sida? Where could she be? Why did Sida go to the station today, this very day... this... very... day? Why did I let her go?"

"My God!" whispered Sabin, then looked at Andrei with the tail of his eye.

The young man was walking like an automaton, dragging his feet along. His checked shirt was wet and black, open down his chest; his matted hair fell over his face and he pushed it aside with a sudden movement. Only his eyes shone very bright and green, sunken in their dark-ringed sockets. 'My child,' thought Sabin shuddering. And he laid a hand on his shoulder and asked anxiously:

"Aren't you cold? It's getting chilly."

"No, father."

"Here, take father's coat."

"But I'm not cold!" snapped Andrei.

"Take it, to please father!" said Sabin entreatingly.

He hadn't got out of a habit of talking about himself in the third person; he had got into it when Andrei was little, and it was full of a strange tenderness, as if the two of them were brothers and talked respectfully about their father. 'Andrei has grown, he's a big boy now. One of these days I'll have to talk to him. He is so inexperienced, so like his mother... We shall go to a restaurant together and start a new friendship.' This made him feel sad. It seemed but yesterday that he came from the office, late as usual, ate his food in a hurry and, to ward off his wife's upbraiding, would take Andrei on his knees and sing to him in a very low, sweet voice:

Here we go
Up and down, up and down
Father's darling little son!

or some old song, one of his grandfather's songs:

Sweetheart, when I die
Do not lay me in a grave...

Andrei would sit looking thoughtful, sucking his thumb. How hard it had been to get him out of this habit! Now the boy had grown, and he might have never seen him again. He took his coat off and put it on his son's shoulders by force.

"Father's stout, he doesn't feel the cold."

His heart was heavy. He did not know why. He was afraid of nothing, as far as he was concerned.

Another kind of smoke with a smell of burnt grass, bark and leaves struck him. He tugged at Andrei's sleeve:

"Don't let's go by the park," he said shivering. "It's full of dead bodies."

They took the main throroughfare, which was all in an uproar. In the streets, patrols in field uniform. A man staggered out of a pub in front of which some ten empty cabs were standing. The man stopped in front of them and, lifting a hand to the sky, muttered hiccupping:

"The sins of mankind are numerous and great. And now the birds of the sky come and sh... on us!"

Sabin hesitated a little, then, without looking at Andrei, said, trying to look indifferent:

"Let's go in for a moment..."

"Mother's waiting for us," Andrei remonstrated feebly.

"Just a moment... I'm so tired! Wait for me outside..."

"I'll come in too."

Sabin was silent; he then frowned, waved his dirty hand with a wry smile:

"Alright, my boy. Let's go on, the plum-brandy is anyhow no good in this place."

Andrei was leaning against the wall with his eyes closed. Now Sabin realized that the boy must be fagged out after all he'd been through. He was so moved that, noticing a cabby leave the pub, he motioned to him:

"Which is your cab, pal?"

"This one," stuttered the cabby. "Get in, please!"

Rocked by the soft springs of the carriage, Andrei felt an embittered exhaustion come over him: his bones seemed as if they had been smashed with a pestle. While the cabby was urging his horse, cracking his whip unnecessarily and wondering aloud at the fact that he was still alive, they did not talk to each other. It was only when they

were nearer their house that Sabin bent down to him and asked:

"Tell me, Andrei, were you worried about father?"

"No," he said without thinking, and he immediately regretted his casual and untruthful answer. The old man, however, hadn't understood and laughed cheerfully:

"We Sabin do not give in so easily. We're of a good stock!... Here we are!" he said, nudging the cabby slightly with his finger. "There, at the green gate! How much do I owe you?"

"Well..." said the cabby staring at him. "Nothing! Nothing whatever! We've got only one life! Gee up, Elisabeth!" And he whipped up his jade of a mare. "Come on, this is the end of the world."

Hearing the well-known creaking of the gate, Andrei had the feeling he was in safety at last. He made room for his father to get in, then let the gate close with a bang.

"You never shut it decently," said Sabin annoyed.

Andrei walked on ahead, round the circular flower-bed with snapdragon and petunias and, what made it more homely still, a tuft or two of tomatoes and peppers. He opened the passage door and shouted:

"Mother! Here we are!"

In the large damp kitchen with its cracked cement floor his mother was waiting near the kitchen-range. When she saw them, she turned pale, then frowned saying:

"Goodness gracious, in what a state you two are!"

"Hasn't the man from the station been here, mother?" asked Sabin anxiously.

"Yes, he has, and he's told me you were both there."

She was running about, disconcerted, her chin trembling slightly. Sabin went up to her and kissed her forehead awkwardly.

"You very nearly saw the last of us," he said. Then, realizing he had blundered, he started fussing about. "Where's the water basin? I'm starving. I'm as hungry as a wolf..."

"Alright, alright," said Ana. "Go and have a wash first."

'And meanwhile hundreds of people are weeping over their dead children, their ruined houses,' thought Andrei angrily. 'And we're fussing about a water-basin.'

"Come and wash yourself," ordered Sabin, handing him the cake of "Cheia" soap. "Strip to the waist."

Then a loud sobbing was heard and they both turned round at the same time; leaning against the wall and covering her eyes with one hand, Ana was biting her lips, trying to stop her weeping:

"I thought... I thought... I here... always alone... you at the station... Let's go away to Lunca! They surely won't go there."

"Don't talk nonsense, mother," said Sabin irritatedly. "You'd better give us something to eat."

"Yes, yes, just a moment," she answered wiping her eyes with her apron.

Andrei sank on the small bed covered with an old and worn-out brown blanket. They ate in silence potato soup and warmed-up roast chicken. As usual, Sabin flew into a temper because he had not been given a napkin; he looked at Andrei as if to say: 'There's never a napkin handy!' Andrei turned away his head. 'Father's getting old,' he thought. He felt cold.

His mother was seated in front of them, waiting to hear what had happened. 'Now there'll be impressions, stories. How good that father isn't talkative.'

"Where's Dan?" he asked.

"In the bedroom, reading." Ana shook her head sadly. "That child's so unsympathetic... I wonder whom he takes after."

'Life has taken on its old course, as if nothing at all had happened. I've been expelled from all the schools, a quarter of the town has been burnt down, and all this seems to have happened at some indefinite time and spot, far back and far away...' He got up from table, said 'thank you' and went into the bedroom. While shutting the door, he heard his father say:

"Andrei behaved splendidly. He's like me. He's no coward like your people."

"Is that you?" asked Dan. He was lolling on a sofa with broken springs, reading a detective story.

"Yes."

Dan was watching him anxiously and Andrei guessed what he would have liked to ask. "What are we going to

do now? Tomorrow, for instance, when it's time to go to school."

"Make room for me."

Andrei pushed him aside and lay down beside him. He had a headache and felt hot, although it was cool in the bedroom.

"The whole school was a fine sight," laughed Dan sarcastically. "They all seemed to have gone mad. As soon as you left, the Head came, took hold of me and marched me off to the shelter. There, conducted by Father Potra, the Greek-Catholics started singing in a chorus: 'Nearer, my God, to Thee.' Your precious Măriș uttered ghastly sounds. I was singing too. You can imagine what il all sounded like. The inspector befouled his pants."

"You don't say so," muttered Andrei indifferently.

"Don't you believe me? When he saw me laughing, he apologized: 'I suffer from bladder-complaint.' I think he was half crazy with fear."

Dan thought he had spoken quite enough to soothe the uneasiness he felt was troubling Andrei. He took up his detective story, then remembered something:

"Lucian has been here. During the air-raid he hid in the school cellar. He left you a note."

"Alright."

Andrei closed his eyes and slowly started counting every breath he took. He knew this physical tranquillity would not last long, and that he would presently begin to think again, to make absurd plans. He could not tell his parents anything. Dan, feeling it was his duty to show him his sympathy, would probably ask him to play a game of chess. 'When they're all in bed, I'll steal into the kitchen. There's sure to be a bottle of plum-brandy in the cupboard and I'll drink till I'm as drunk as a fiddler: maybe I'll manage to fall asleep. If this bombardment had happened yesterday... Or if a bomb had fallen on the shelter after he left... But Dan was there and...' He smiled painfully; there was no way out.

From the kitchen came the plaintive voice of Iurcovici's wife:

"So you've come, Mr. Sabin? I wanted to send my husband for you. Not even today..." and she started

weeping. "Better if a bomb had fallen on us. Not even today... and never... He isn't human!"

"Don't worry," said Ana. "One day God will make things alright. Look here, you know we aren't big eaters... Look here... this has been left and..."

"I kiss your hand, I kiss your hand. What would I do without..."

Andrei closed his eyes tightly. "Why does she humiliate them? Why can't she find another way of helping her? It's dreadful to make people feel like beggars! I must talk this over with mother, some day."

He waited for the woman to leave, then rose heavily, picked up Lucian's envelope from the table (marked: 'For Andrei, personally'), went into the kitchen and told his mother he wanted to go to bed. Octavian had fallen asleep on the small wooden bed, and was snoring.

"Have a nice cup of tea before you go to bed, Andrei. Try and sleep. You look... aged."

Andrei drank his tea, looking over the brim of his cup. His mother too had aged; he had never seen her look as old as she was now: her dirty-grey hair hung in wisps from under a multi-coloured shawl; she had thin white hands with fingers eaten by lye. Had they been alone, he would have told her everything and she would have understood him. His heart filled with tenderness. He would have liked to get up and stroke her hand, and his gesture would have been childish and unusual at the same time, but he didn't do it, for his eyes would have filled with tears. Suppressing a sigh, he rose slowly.

"Isn't there anything else you'd like, Andrei? Shall I open a jar of stewed fruit?"

"No," he answered hoarsely. He read a slight pain in her eyes, as though he had refused something of greater importance.

"I am dead beat," he said, trying to appear merry. "Father and I carried heaps of travelling-bags scattered all over the station. I hurt my knee too."

"Go to bed, then..."

Between the cool bed-sheets with the familiar smell of lavender, he felt cold, a sort of cold like that he had felt when waiting in the school-hall. And the present waiting

was quite as turbidly tense. With his eyelids pressed down tightly, he tried to conjure up Sonia's features, her loud yet slightly caressing laughter, the pearl-like gleam of her teeth, the dimple in her left cheek, but he felt so unhappy, so alone, and everything seemed so utterly useless...

His mother came in on tiptoe to call Dan to supper... From the kitchen came Sabin's snores as loud as those of of a navvy. Ana whispered:

"Dan, supper's ready... Softly! Andrei's asleep, poor boy..."

She arranged the quilt over his chest, quite needlessly. Andrei opened his eyes and smiled sorrowfully.

"Sleep," whispered his mother. "Try to sleep and forget..."

But for a long time before sinking into the soft darkness of sleep, Andrei heard the usual noises of the house: the clatter of the dishes in the kitchen, his father's mutterings, the click of the switch when Dan turned off the light, and the rustle of the book flung down on the carpet; then, the wind shaking the horse-chestnut-trees in the street, a car racing in the night... 'And tomorrow? Tomorrow?'

About midnight the planes flew past again, but the hooters did not sound. The deep drone floated in the air, shaking the stony silence of the town, but everyone was so tired after the excitement of the day that they did not wake up. Only Octavian sat up in bed, listened in a daze and thought he had better not disturb their sleep. He just smacked his lips and muttered to himself:

"Damn them for not letting people rest even at night!"

CHAPTER II

Andrei's mother didn't send him to school the next morning. She let him sleep on, and he woke only when Dan, back from school about eleven, shouted from the door:

"All schools have been closed. The school-year's over!"

Half asleep, Andrei recorded these words, and they called up a well-known picture: the pupils rushing down the steps flooded by glorious sunshine and making for the bank of the Mureș where the traditional burning of the heaped-up Latin, Mathematics and French handbooks was held. The next second the picture was blotted out to make room for the following feeling: the joy of the holidays, a return to childhood. The river-bordered meadow, the steppe drowned in the afternoon whiteness, the slow

water of the Teuz flowing lazily under the drooping osiers; presently the insecurity of sleep wrapped itself round him, like a wet sheet. He hadn't the courage to open his eyes, lest everything be but illusion, in which case, he would have liked to sleep longer, but Dan shook him by the shoulder, whispering into his ear:

"Get up, Andrei! We're on holiday!"

So it was true. He sat up in bed and made a wry face: all his muscles were sore. Dan lay down on the quilt and told him how Drăgan had given each pupil marks without examining them, just according to a personal but immutable estimation. He had called the roll: 'Avram Iancu*! (the boy's real name was Antoniu). A dunce. Average marks: four! Alexandrescu! Not... you! Four! Anton! He's not so bad! Five!' And so on, until he came to Sabin. Now Drăgan condescended to smile, eyeing the class with a furtive look.

Lolling close to Dan, Andrei felt so excited that he nudged him:

"Well! Go on!"

Dan went on giving an imitation of Drăgan:

" 'Sabin! Where is that fellow?' 'Absent!' I called out. 'Well! (of all the boys Dan was the best at imitating Drăgan's dry and abrupt way of emphasizing his thoughts) This one, yes! Ten!...' Then Mărieș rose and said with an asinine smile: 'Please, sir, Sabin was expelled yesterday, for good!' Drăgan eyed him in astonishment, as if he were a stranger, frowned, made a face, then said sharply: 'Listen you, what's your name? Has anybody asked for your advice?' Mărieș turned pale, I thought he was going to faint with fear; Drăgan then laughed. 'What's your name?' 'Mărieș, sir!' Drăgan flew into a temper, began to turn over page after page of the roll — the whole class was quaking — then he turned them all at a time and with the sly look you know he smacked his lips. ''rieș!' He searched for him in the opposite corner of the school-room and, when his eyes rested on him, he said in surprise: 'Oh, is that you? Come on, let's see!' With a lump in his throat

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* One of the leaders of the Revolution of 1848, in Transylvania

Mărieş began to read: '*Yellveery, mah tew fay ung rappore bienne sengsair? Nay deegueeze tew rienne de ce kee dee mong pair?*' 'That'll do!' thundered Drăgan cutting his reading short. 'You... no! Well, *la grammaire!*' '*Lay pasay semple,*' Mărieş sighed, 'Hey!' and Drăgan looked at him bewildered. 'Are you saying *pasay sempl*'?' 'No, sir! Do I pronounce '*pasay sempl?*' he said in a louder voice. 'Do these other boys say: '*pasay sempl?*... That'll do! Minus three. So your average mark is seven. No it isn't... You've got an eight and a minus two. That's seven. Your average mark is six. Sit down!' Well, wasn't that ripping?" Dan asked, laughing. "Mărieş sat down as if he were stunned. Then the door opened and the servant came in with the teachers' register. Classes have been adjourned on account of the bombardments. We're free! Tomorrow we're off to Lunca."

Andrei was looking for his clothes. He was famished.

"Lest I forget..." said Dan lowering his voice. "When the bell had rung for break-up, Răducanu asked me to tell you that he would call one of these days, in the evening. He told me to give you his love, and he wants you to buck up. Yes, and Teddie then asked me to remind you that he's expecting us at their place this afternoon. They're having some sort of party. Said it'd cheer you up, even if you're a Bolshie." And becoming shy again, he added quietly: "I'm not going!"

"Neither am I," said Andrei hurriedly. Then he thought: 'Why not, after all?'

"No, we're both going," he said gayly. "I feel I'd like to dance, to..."

"The devil you do," said Dan making a face. "I loathe the whole lot of them. I wonder what you find in them and — he smiled a guilty smile — what should I be doing there, I who am as clumsy as an elephant?"

"No discussion about it, d'ye hear me?"

Although he wasn't so keen on going to the party together wih Dan, he insisted. Had he gone alone, his mother would have upbraided him: "You never take this boy anywhere, and he's so helpless! I didn't expect you to behave like that to him when you know how kind

they've been to us. Give him a good time, make him forget he's a poor, fatherless child..."

"All right, if you insist," muttered Dan, "I'll go, although I'am sure you'll be angry with me again."

"Andrei," rang out his mother's voice from the kitchen, "hurry up, dear, the coffee's ready! There's also a letter for you!"

'Sonia!' thought Andrei with a start. He put on his shirt, quite flustered went into the newly scrubbed kitchen and took the letter. It was not her handwriting and for an instant he was about to throw it into the fire without reading it. He took from its envelope, however, a bundle of sheets of writing-paper covered with small loose letters; he recognized Suslănescu's affected handwriting. 'What does he want of me?' While sipping his coffee, he began to read:

Tuesday, 2.V. 1944

Your paper made a deep impression on me, and, although I didn't feel at all like writing, I've been compelled to give up my 'humble tasks.'

I consider what you have done a childish act in itself, a vain bravado made in a moment when you — most likely — had nothing better to do, when a teacher "as dull as most of them," was boring you with dates, facts and occurrences of no importance whatever, with the subject of a paper which he had not conceived himself, *and which maybe was as unpleasant to him as it was to you.*

Now that I have cleared up the cause of this most original reply, I shall tackle other points which reflect your way of looking at certain problems, the most serious problems our unhappy and sorely-tried nation has got to face just now.

Your 'paper' will have no result whatever. When you had read it and I had expelled you from the schoolroom (forgive me, but you will presently see why I did so), I talked to your schoolfellows who are such good, clever boys and whom you, Andrei, despise in a body. Every one of them *promised he wouldn't say* a word *to anybody. I asked them to swear they wouldn't! They did. In my narrow-minded way of seeing things I have always known and I still know*

to value the labour and merits of all those who are my equals or even my inferiors.

I have despised no one and will never do it *(this is my answer to your way of looking upon others). I have had too much to endure: in my life spring or youth I have never smiled upon me.*

I opened my eyes for the first time in front of a grave — my father's. *I grew up amid the sufferings of a mother who was compelled to sell her house and her land — I feel I must add proudly and as a reproach to you: her ancestral land. But this will be the only time I shall say so. I witnessed how a fine past was ruined in a world in which we possibly are not understood. I spent my student days reading books that are useless, I partake with heart-rending intensity in the drama of my country, and my heart is empty but for a distrust which I try to drive away by hoping in a better future, for myself and for everybody, a future which I feel can not come through blood and massacres, fraternal strife, hatred and constraint, but through the creation of one's own inner equilibrium. I can see no happy future ahead of us, nor do I want to see any emerging from revolutions. I want one that should be the fruit of our own achievements.*

I have mentioned the word revolution, *for this is the only terrible conclusion of your way of thinking. If every one of us gave vent to all our discontent...*

Judged from this standpoint, your 'paper,' forgive me, Andrei, seems ghastly, cruel and wicked. You wrote in it:

'I have been asked to write about war. I might manufacture high-sounding periods about Decebal, Trajan and other sacred heroes, about all the wars that are also considered sacred, but I can't. I do not believe in all that stuff and I cannot lie. I hold that there is no greater humiliation of human dignity than to compel a man to propound what he does not believe in, to make him the apologist of things he loathes, to drive him to feel ashamed and sick of himself!'

What a contradiction, Andrei! You, a clever, refined boy, not to understand the commands of history! Its chaos or maybe its mysterious order which we cannot conceive! Rumania is following the natural line of her destiny which is to fight against barbarity as she has done for centuries.

I do not love the Germans, Andrei, I know their insolence, their arrogance, I know how they plunder... But we are fighting at their side, and war has its laws, its chivalry. We must go right to the end, and I swear that if we should happen to be beaten I myself will take up arms. You said further:

'Still, the hollow-sounding periods we hear may yet have an object? I've read in Remarque's book Nothing New on the Western Front *about a class of schoolboys who volunteered for the front, intoxicated by so much empty talk. There, amid all the dreadful human suffering, came the bitter awakening. But it was too late, far too late.'*

Who do you think is to wage war, Andrei? People must be given an object. You further wonder: 'What are are we doing in Russia?' I quite agree that you, John, Peter or Paul have no personal interest there. But the country, Andrei, the homeland? Have you *the right to supersede it?*

Now another quotation from your alarming paper:

'...While we, poisoned in our youth, robbed of every pleasure, have to suffocate under the insane rules of an imbecile society. And still, I believe, I believe from all my heart that life is beautiful and that one day, when we will know to be ourselves, we shall be truly and for ever free!'

Can life be beautiful outside the society we live in? And if society is so imbecile with its idiotic rules including school rules and the obligation of getting pupils to write papers on themes set by the MINISTRY, *how can life be beautiful? What can one set one's hope on?*

I can find but one explanation: your imagination has changed everything you desire into a certainty, and you are hankering ardently after something new in this late spring so dreadful for us. For us Rumanians, Andrei! Moreover, how do you know that this imbecile society will not give you the opportunity of making your wishes come true? I understand that you are at the age of great romantic dreams: freedom and justice for the many. But the many, do they need that?

I know you will not believe me. You are at the age when men like Danton, Desmoulins, Robespierre and Saint-Just are born. But Danton was a traitor to the revolution, Desmoulins an idealistic wind-bag, Robespierre a fiend impelled by the rancour of impotency, while Saint-Just, whom you

admire, that angelic figure, that pure-minded man, was, according to characterizations made by French *historians, not by myself:*

Chénier: a blood-thirsty tiger
Mignet: the fiend with the beautifully parted hair
Rémy de Gourmont: the panther
Sainte-Beuve: an odious and histrionic young man
Taine: a live sword
Lamartine: the dream of Dracon's Republic
Michelet: the archangel of death.
Always bear in mind the fate of all those men.

But what do you care? Everything should be as you dream of in your feverish dreams, that is why you deny, you drive away, you stubbornly spurn life and the real society, the existing society, be it good or bad.

You are always waiting to see the world of your dreams come true, maybe clad in too much bookish charm: Gorky or others — and I somehow think, though you do not say so — that your dream can come true only through blood, through revenge, through the unleashing of the fearful gregarious instinct of the blind multitudes.

And if this does come true, and a new society is created, it will still not be the one you dream of.

You forget a revolution is a terrible phenomenon, an all-devouring behemoth, yet you are aflame with its romance.

You forget that since the creation of the world, and all over the world, a few men lead, and all the others are led. *That freedom is a poetic allegory, nothing more.*

For my part, if I am to be honest to the end, I do not see a better world elsewhere: I resignedly accept the life I am living, I enrich it within my heart and mind with the image of the great achievements in our history and in the history of France.

When I was a schoolboy and thereafter an undergraduate, I dreamt too much of the 'wonders of life' and I have achieved absolutely nothing.

You are sure to answer that those are the words of a coward, of a deserter.

I would rather I were mistaken and that you reap the benefits of the future. A. S.

P.S. You may burn this letter.

But the worst of all, Andrei, is that those ideas of yours have made me shudder for your sake.

Andrei had read the letter so tensely that he hadn't noticed his mother looking at him inquisitively. He thrust the sheets of paper into his pocket, crushing them.

"Who's the letter from?"

"Suslănescu, the history master."

"Is it really?"

Proud and glad, the mother said nothing more.

Andrei rose from the table and went out into the courtyard. He walked as far as the summer-house under the apple-tree and found a place to nestle in, among the old cases, broken hen-coops and broken chairs lying about. The letter had disquieted and moved him, although he did not like to admit as much. 'As a matter of fact, Suslănescu is honest-minded,' he said to himself and then added irritated: 'Damn his honesty and damn him! All tommy rot! It seems he wants to apologize... Why should he? I asked nothing, of him or of anyone else.'

In the evening of the day when the pupils in his form had to write their examination paper he had taken a walk in the park with the master. Suslănescu, who was excited and stubborn, kept talking all sort of rot. Andrei felt annoyed and at the same time pleased that Suslănescu didn't begin discussing his paper. Now that the fever of satisfaction had died down, he felt anxious. They parted suddenly, as if running away from one another. It was on May 2. He took out the next letter.

Wednesday, *3. V. 1944*

"*The only difference between people is their degree of stupidity.*"

Dear Andrei,

I saw that last night you were more indifferent than ever.

Maybe I was mistaken. You seemed lost, divorced from the reality surrounding you, withdrawn in yourself, wrapped in your own thoughts.

When we parted, I loitered about the streets and, when I returned home, rather late, I seemed to see through my

window your figure outlined against the shadow of the night. You were looking too flippant and rather blasé. *I can hardly tell you all I felt and thought. I paced the room, taking small steps, so that my foot would cover a whole flower or a square of the carpet.*

I was bored.

I stopped to look at the two vulgar paintings of rural landscapes à la Fontainebleau, *with too blue a sky, large splashes of white clouds and field flowers of a glaring red.*

To while away time I started taking the books out of my small improvised library... Especially the books on the French revolution. I turned over with fear the vellum pages, and familiar faces peered at me from them: Charlotte Corday, a sort of feminine Andrei Sabin, Bailly, Mirabeau, Danton, Saint-Just... Grand, splendid words ring through my bachelor's room: Pour vaincre il faut de l'audace, encore de l'audace et toujours de l'audace! Est-ce qu'on emporte la patrie à la semelle de ses souliers ? Mon domicile ? Bientôt le néant ... Mon nom? Dans le Panthéon de l'Histoire *... *I listened, appalled, to the savage strains of the Marseillaise sung at Valmy, when the bakers, butchers, cobblers and all the rabble of Paris defeated the Duke of Brunswick's powerful combined forces. I called up the graceful shadows of the marquises and viscounts with high-sounding names, who climbed the steps of the guillotine...*

And then, Andrei, I brought out a booklet which I I have never mentioned to you. It ends as follows: Les prolétaires n'ont rien à perdre, sauf leurs chaînes; ils ont un monde à gagner. Prolétaires de tous les pays, unissez vous!**

Andrei, I am afraid. I took the booklet and tore it to pieces, to very small pieces. Tell me, do you really think our world, the childish memories, the rivers, the Carpathian mountains will tumble down?

During our walk you probably expected something from me, but my heart was so full of shame and fear! I talked

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* To vanquish one needs audacity, more audacity and still more audacity. Can one carry one's country on the soles of one's shoes? My home? Presently, non-existence... My name? In the Panthéon of History... (Danton)

** Proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains; they have a world to win: Working men of all lands, unite!

to you idly, of volumes, of my books, of myself: you heard the same things twice over, the same perennial argument about my native town, the History of the Slavs *by P. P. Panaitescu, "Nemi" albums; then about the poor little town again, with its suburbs lying at the foot of the mountain!*

As you see, the alpha *and* omega *of all my talks. But ... if I can't help it?*

I love books *too dearly (maybe not so much their contents as their shape, edition, year, publisher, the dust on them — a professional deformation, something of a bookworm) and also the past.*

The past is for me a potent comfort and a source of optimism for the present and the future. No matter how it be. And to conclude I shall use my friend Corian's words:

"People stand on their heads, with their legs up" — a title he wants for his book of reminiscences; it is not original, in fact, it has already been used by a certain German for one of his novels. But does it matter? It will not lessen Corian's merit, will it? Other men, in fact, have long ago expressed the same idea in other words:

"People think with their feet," or more pregnantly still, although it is a vulgar expression:

"People think with their bum!"

A. S.

P. S. Please do not show this letter to anyone; better tear it up. It was written in a moment of bitter childishness, in a night devoid of a romantic setting — the owl hooting, the ticking of the cathedral clock that is just striking midnight.

2 o'clock in the morning.

It has all been lies, lies, nothing but lies! Andrei, something terrible has happened. Andrei, please, do try and forgive me. I didn't mean to tell you. I didn't mean to write you, I've been lying throughout my letter. I don't know which boy in your form has been blabbing. Most likely Măriș, that foul loathsome Jesuit. Today the Head called me aside and roared at me: 'Listen! I've been told that Sabin has written a lot of trash in his examination paper and you made him read it before the class, and there was some communist stuff in it!'

He roared at me, threatening to sack me, Andrei!

Try and understand me! I have an old mother who's almost starving, and a sister I must keep at school and provide for; I have obligations to fulfil towards those dearly loved beings. And that isn't all. I was compelled to give him your paper, he even wanted to search my pockets! My God, I shall never be able to look you in the face again! All sorts of absurd thoughts flash through my mind. Why did you do it, Andrei? And during my class too?

What you believe doesn't really matter, but what you did frightens me.

Andrei, I couldn't help it. Please understand me!

I am looking forward to one sign from you, a single one, which will restore my comparative peace of mind. Moreover, I swear I shall do all I can to help you. Should you be willing, and if it is possible, we might go to the seaside or to Sinaia this summer.

Words are of no use. I am a wretch.

Stiff with reading in a cramped position, Andrei covered the letter with the palm of his hand. The wording of the sentences, their snivelling rhythm called up Suslănescu: his sallow drawn face, always unshaven, his moist, beseeching eyes and their continually fluttering eyelids. Poor Suslănescu! What a struggle between his desire to be an 18th-century gentleman and the filthiness of life. Are these things not simpler in reality, as Schwartz thinks, he wondered.

He took up the last letter, a much shorter one.

Friday, 5.V.1944

I no longer dare call you 'friend' or look at myself.

Ah, Seigneur, donnez-moi la force et le courage
De contempler mon coeur et mon corps sans dégôut!

Your composure, your superiority, which this time were no pose but constitutional and stable, have quite upset me. They upset me to such a degree that I wonder if it is any use continuing to drag on my wretched mean existence.

I saw you defying the inspector — who had come down specially for your case; I saw you when the alarm was given — I met Lucian a few hours ago and he told me you went to the station and worked there with Mr. Sabin until late at night, as if nothing had happened; *it was then only that I clearly and definitely realized my ignominy.*

In the shelter, while you — as I learned — were running along the streets on your way to the station, I was shaking, stupefied with animal fear.

You may be right, Andrei, I'm not sure. With my whole heart, I hope it isn't so.

When I had parted with Lucian I entered a pub where the men, more numerous than usual, were talking of the dead, of the ghastly catastrophe that had befallen our town. And they were also talking of what was in store for us. Most of them were people of the lower classes, in overalls, dirty, unshaven, toothless, with no fine features mellowed by time or by the exquisiteness of the blood, and I shuddered. My God! how many times was I to shudder that day! I pretended to listen attentively to the story of a fellow who had been in the station. I stood him a quarter of rum and rejoiced with revolting cowardice when he accepted it. I had some myself too, and got tight. On my way home I vomited, leaning against a lamp-post.

That is all I have to say.

I am alone and fear is in my heart.

A. S.

P. S. I have also learnt that a couple of years ago you wrote a brilliant paper on war. You talked of the 'splendid phenomenon' which enables Man to rise above his own ghastly platitudes; you were full of enthusiasm for the resistance to the last moment (Waterloo or the Thermopylae) for the very reason of its being entirely devoid of finality. I do not know what path you took that day, I do not know what happened to you, I know nothing. I am seized with horror at the thought of being a human being. Horror and loathing.

Răducanu has been sacked from our school and sent to a hamlet in Dobruja. This too tortures me. Why had there been one who behaved like a Man? This is yet another mirror reflecting my wretched, appalling, disheartening human condition!

Andrei rose to his feet, thoughtfully, holding the bundle of sheets in his hand. Suslănescu's confession had quite disarmed him. No matter what he himself might have done, he would never have been able to put down on paper such humiliating excuses. He would have tried to present things in another light, a more manly one. Now, he would no doubt have to throw those letters into the fire. It was the best thing to do. He would prefer never to see Suslănescu again: he was sure he would always read in his eyes, no matter what they talked of, the same dumb question: 'Have you forgiven me? Have you made allowances? However strange it may seem to you, just let me add that I am waiting for a sign of encouragement from you.'

He looked at the sky. Yesterday, at this time, he was before the commission, or maybe the hooters had started whistling. Maybe today again... At the back of the courtyard, standing very close to the cement wall, was a poplar looking misty in its delicate greenness. With its trembling leaves steeped in the afternoon sunshine, it seemed to look down with the contempt of tallness upon the other trees in the yard, a few stunted apple- and pear-trees. 'Why have I drawn this comparison?' he wondered, rather ashamed of himself.

He entered the house, went to the dining-room and opened the cupboard where he kept his books. On the lower shelf were his papers: a drama in verse begun three years before and not finished, the diary he had left off writing scores of times, Lucian's letters from the beginning of their friendship, and a large album, a Hogarth which Suslănescu had given him as a New Year's present. In its pages, among the grotesque and tragical figures carousing, making love and dying, he hid those letters. He stood for a while in front of the open chest, his foot playing absent-mindedly with the tassels of the carpet.

CHAPTER III

The house of the Varga family stood in a quiet back street which pedestrians always avoided thinking it was a blind alley. At one end, in a small square enclosed by a heavy, rusty bronze chain, rose the neo-Gothic silhouette of a German church, one of the town's curiosities, for in 1917, the year when it had been erected, a zealous architect had engraved above the ogival portal: *Gott strafe England.* Since 1940 the inscription had again acquired a present-day interest.

The Varga house, built by the same architect, looked like a Swiss chalet, but instead of soaring to the sky, it

sprawled along the pavement for some forty metres not unlike an Alpine hamlet. It was adorned with sundry little turrets, round attic windows, tiles and stained-glass windows. The façade bore a round medallion representing some sort of Siegfried or St. George holding a sword and a pair of scales. The sculptor had had the thoughtful intention of symbolizing Mr. Salvator Varga's activity as nationalist fighter and well-known lawyer.

When he had been asked there for the first time, Andrei had gazed shyly at the building, and Lucian had told him passionately that he couldn't stand it, that it was a disgusting house, the house of an upstart desirous of making an indecent show of his wealth. 'We wanted a simple, a very simple house,' Lucian had lied, feeling that Andrei regarded it as ludicrous. Indeed Andrei was wondering how Lucian had played, when a child, in such a pompous temple. He must have walked about all day long, dressed in a small velvet coat with a lace collar. Here the breaking of one of the stained-glass windows would have been a catastrophe.

Every time he came to the house, he hurried, looking around stealthily, to reach Lucian's room. It was full of books, and until six o'clock, when the maid-servant brought in tea and cakes, Andrei would go on telling Lucian, with an irritation, the cause of which the latter did not suspect, all sorts of dynamite-loaded things — so he thought, at least — about the non-existence of God, the uselessness of school and family ties. Lucian sat and gazed at him in horrified admiration.

He never asked Lucian to his house. There was no place where one could talk quietly, as everything would be heard in the kitchen where Andrei's mother sat crocheting "so as not to disturb the boys," and his father, tired out after his work, lay snoring in the small wooden bed. Their varnished poverty hurt him. He was ashamed of the "home-made" cakes, of the few words his father felt it his duty to say to Lucian. And the fact that he was so petty minded as to care about such things also tortured him.

For Lucian nothing mattered except their friendship.

Andrei rang the bell three times, then turned to look at Dan who was standing close to the wall, rubbing all its whitewash off with his coat. Aware of his cousin's silent remonstrances, Dan muttered something. He could not abide this company, and the presence of girls made him feel shy. It was only at the close of a party that he felt at ease, after having made a conquest of them, all by his harsh, unexpected replies, a result of his confirmed and incurable bashfulness. At the bottom of his heart Dan would have liked to resemble Andrei, always so smart, although his clothes were only old suits of his father's altered by the tailor.

The gate was opened by an old wrinkled maid-servant who showed them in.

"All the young gentlemen are already here. They're dancing."

They crossed the large courtyard with its Florentine archway encircled by hollyhocks, skirted a walk lined with wooden spears topped by coloured-glass globes, went round the green-tiled swimming pool (there was a tin kiosk near it, looking like an empty preserve tin), then went up to the terrace, as big as a skating-rink, covered with wicker tables and chairs, and entered the spacious dining-room where, despite very tall windows, it was always dark. The heavy Biedermayer pieces of furniture seemed rhinoceroses crouching in the corners. A few pictures in massive frames: a violet sunset, a still-life with fishes, grapes and a pipe, and at the place of honour the portrait of Iuliu Maniu conceived by Mr. Baruția in the Rembrandt style.

The drawing-room door was opened, and Teddie Varga appeared on the threshold beating with the thick cork soles of his shoes the rhythm of a blues. He was always dressed in the height of fashion: a long, loose jacket with narrow lapels and broad sloping shoulders, tight trousers showing white socks and a necktie reaching down to his knees.

"Hello, Andrei!" he said excitedly, truly, glad to see him. "I was waiting for you — the gang simply can't listen to any good music without immediately wanting to shake a leg. I solemnly declare: I have five new Louis Armstrong records. Listen, he's just playing *Ain't Misbehaving*. Stun-

ning, isn't it?" Then, seeing Dan, he remembered his duty as host. "How are you, Fat-guts?"

"Damn your eyes!" answered Dan unruffled.

Teddie laughed gaily:

"You're a scream, laddie, honestly you are!" He took them by the arm and they all went in. "The great hero André Sabin and his cousin... Jules Verne," he added, at a loss to find something on the spur of the moment.

Lucian, bored by the chatter of two girls, left them and turned to meet them.

"I thought you weren't coming," he whispered to Andrei.

Still holding his hand, he looked at him anxiously. He would have liked to talk to him alone about the bombardment, and now, when the excitement was over, to ask Andrei why, why he — usually so lucid and sarcastic — had behaved so rashly. But this could not be done for the moment, so Lucian cast annoyed and contemptuous glances at the girls and boys who were either sunk in armchairs, perched on the edge of the table or sprawled all in a heap on the sofa. Andrei too reviewed them quickly: there was Gigi Moldoveanu, "the son of the 'Speranţa' Bookshop," hefty and sunburnt, Olimpiu Hanganu as fair and stiff as a member of the *Hitlerjugend*, Ionel Spinanţiu, short and dumpy, fingering with alternative anxiety his well-oiled hair and his new suit, Micky Belega, the prefect's son, slim, with a distinguished limp (he had broken his leg three times in riding accidents), Sorin Horciony, the degenerate offspring of the owner-founder's family, a pimply wretch, with his small shoulder-blades showing like blunted wings, and Petre "Muggsy" Văgălău, notorious for always being ploughed at the school examinations, the son of a rich miller of Pecica and Teddie Varga's bosom-friend. Between the two there was a sort of symbiosis: Teddie was polishing the rugged bumpkin, and the latter, an amateur boxer, defended him in the fights which the incredible insolence of the youngest child of the Varga family always caused. Then the young girls: Gipsy Belega, tall and of a copper-coloured complexion, with coarse, dark, curly hair, Dia Moldoveanu, Gigi's sister, plump and

conceited, Lili Crăioc (Lili was an assumed name, for only her uncle and god-father, Father Crăioc, knew her real name, Salomea), a very pretty girl, fair and looking like a sportswoman — her being there was a mere accident, for the priest, her spiritual mentor, would hardly ever let her attend parties. "Beware, darling — he would say — men want *to know you.*" Lili did not exactly know the Bible meaning of the word, so she avoided making new acquaintances. Adelina Botiș, daughter of the deputy mayor, was big and full-bodied, always flaunting a distant, comptemptuous smile, to conceal her disarming stupidity. All these were acquaintances and friends he had known for years. They were looking at him in silence, inquisitively, with a certain vague irritation. He smiled defiantly, but when he turned to Lucian, there quivered a grieved question in his eyes: 'Why did you want me to come? I might as well have...'

Lucian patted his shoulder and, although he realized it wasn't the right thing to do, his gesture was a bit patronizing and Andrei shrunk from it, annoyed. In fact he had come to meet Sonia, but did not dare ask if she too had been invited.

"Oh, come now. Don't think you're going to talk philosophy here!" said Teddie in alarm. "What the deuce! D'you think this is the Academy?"

"Teddie!" said Lucian, scolding him mildly.

"Nothing doing! For whom, if not for Andrei Sabin the great expert have I been running about for days on end to get the Armstrong records? I'm rather afraid — he whispered jokingly — that father will notice I've been tampering with his bank deposit hidden under the linen in his wardrobe."

"Teddie is a character out of Gide's novels!" exclaimed Lucian laughing.

"So, now you're going to listen to the grand record, *That's when I'll come back to you.* Louis Armstrong, the Beethoven of jazz music!"

Dan had sunk into an armchair and did nothing to conceal his yawns.

"How are you getting on, Dan?" asked Lucian politely. He never managed to understand this boy.

"I'm bored."

Everyone began to laugh: the answer was famous. When in the first form, Dan — usually as shy as a young girl — had yawned aloud during the scripture class, Father Crăioc had inquired: 'Say, what's the matter with you, Todorăscu?' 'I'm bored.' 'Oh, that's it! Todorăscu is bored!' said the priest boiling over with suppressed rage. 'Let's just give him a four!' Dan, feeling sure that for one single four he'd be ploughed, laid his head on the bench and started weeping silently. Still this did not make him any wiser. During another class, in the fifth form, when the priest was sweating profusely trying to answer one of Andrei's questions: 'How did the first people on earth multiply if Adam and Eve were left but one son, Cain? Did it mean that the Eternal Father had legitimated the incest, or had Cain to bear children all by himself?' Dan broke into a boisterous laughter. 'What are you grinning at like a fool, Mr. Todorăscu? Whom are you laughing at?' 'At you, Father,' came Dan's clear answer. 'I think you're not quite right in the head, Todorăscu, my boy. Your mind's out of order... You ought to go to a lunatic asylum.'

"What is it we're celebrating today?" asked Micky Belega rolling his R's.

"It's my old lady's birthday," answered Teddie. "But I've no idea how many she's been celebrating up to now."

"Aren't we to toast in honour of your respected mother?"

"That's it! Let's have a drink, boys!" cried Văgălău with an air of great distinction.

Mocha liqueur was served. The moment when Andrei drank off his small glass, Sonia entered. Andrei blinked repeatedly and set his teeth. He felt the blood rushing to his face, turning it scarlet, as it did every time he met Sonia in the presence of others. Suddenly shy, he laid the glass down on the tray with trembling fingers and tried to go up to her. Teddie, however, got there before him. He rushed up to Sonia, clapping his hands admiringly.

"You're lovely, sweetheart!* Thank you for gracing our party with your presence... I know, I know why

* In English

you've come. He's here, yes, he's here... all right... Look, there he is!"

Standing a few steps away, Andrei was looking straight into her eyes. Everything was all right now; he did not mind the others watching him, nor that Lucian had begun to sulk, realizing that the two of them would not manage to be all by themselves that day, or that Teddie was making exaggerated signs of complicity. He came near her, pressed her long, tapering fingers and whispered something — he didn't know what; then he fell silent. 'Neither of us should have come,' he thought. 'I ought to have gone to her place, we could have talked about lots of things, she would have played the piano for me... and then those sweet moments of silence and understanding....'

He suddenly got hold of her arm and led her into a corner. He leant against the corner of the big sideboard.

"I've been looking for you, Andrei," she said anxiously. "I wanted to..."

"It's all right... not now... please..."

He looked at her. She was almost as tall as he, but looked still a little girl. Her large grey-blue eyes had turned very dark now. Her brown wavy hair hung down to her shoulders, framing her small and slightly blushing face. There was something restful in her, even in the simple way she wore her green frock made of heavy silk.

"Andrei, dear," she whispered laying her open hand over his own. Andrei had devoted a page of his diary to Sonia's handshake and to her smile. With a passion that disturbed him every time he read the passage, he had mentioned the warm, secret intimacy created between them by a mere handshake, and wondered if she shook other people's hands in the same way. "What have you done, Andrei?" whispered Sonia.

"Not now!" he answered curtly. "Not here."

He knew he had hurt her, but to speak about that just now was more than he could bear.

"Sorry..." said Teddie coming between them. "Let's dance, Sonia. You're the only one who..."

She cast a hurried glance at Andrei. He was frowning, his green eyes were shining stubbornly and he looked very sad. He shrugged:

"Go along and dance..."

He knew Sonia despised Teddie; still, when he saw them dancing, a wicked, mean feeling stole into his heart. Although Teddie was not nearly so tall as Sonia, he did not look ridiculous dancing with her. He danced well, without any exaggeration. From the other corner of the drawing-room Lucian kept watching Andrei. 'Our friendship too is becoming a burden,' thought the latter. 'I'm beginning to keep lots of things from him... For instance, I've never talked to him about Sonia. And I cannot tell him why I wrote that paper either. I don't know myself why I did it. No, no, I do, but I can't tell him.'

Gipsy Belega came in front of him, curtsied and said sarcastically:

"I'd like a dance with you, Andrei. Damn it all, we've been here three hours, and we still feel chilly."

He put his arm round her waist, listlessly. He danced carelessly, but he had such a sense of rhythm that he could not make mistakes. It was only one year ago that Sonia had taught him to dance. 'Relax, for Goodness' sake!' she would say. 'One would think you're frightened or ashamed of dancing.' Gypsy put her cheek against his and murmured softly into his ear:

"Tell me, what have you been up to? Yesterday afternoon everyone was talking about you and the bombardment. Papa said that... Say, what did you actually do?"

"I was conspiring against the state. And if you ask any more questions, I'll leave you right here and go straight home."

"You mysterious boy! You're the nicest of all the boys here. But you're nasty and stuck up."

She glued herself to him, trembling all over. Deeply stirred, Andrei was aware of her slim body with its elongated muscles and smooth belly, of the slight pricking of her suspenders on his thighs, and of an unsuspected intimate quiver. He wanted to get away from her.

"What? Are you afraid?" Gipsy asked hoarsely. "I don't care about anything... Why don't you come and see us?"

"I don't know," answered Andrei turning his back on her.

Now Sonia was dancing with Văgălău who kept trying to put his cheek close to hers. Andrei clenched his fists.

Văgălău was stronger than he and always ready for a fight. He went nearer them, elbowing his way among the couples dancing and heard him say: "Da-da-de-dee-da-da-owah-owah!... That's the 'scat' style. That's how Bix Biederbreke sang, who died at twenty-three because of too much gin. That's what Teddie told me. Da-da-da, the 'scat' style..."

A little further away, lolling on the sofa, Micky Belega was explaining to Dia how he had broken his leg for the third time:

"Thunderbolt, a terrible horse... and so vicious, hang it! Dad would not give me peace: 'Get on it, you cur! You're the son of Belega, the cavalry general, aren't you?' What ever could I do? And Thunderbolt, damn him..."

"Oh, Mihi!" said Dia blushing scarlet. "What language!"

"...threw me down like a bag of potatoes. 'You damned fool,' shouted father, 'I'll show you how to ride!' And he mounted Tunderbolt, while I, damn me, could hardly see for the pain. Broken my shin-bone, that's what I've done!"

"Poor Mihi!"

Lucian, tipsy after only one glass, was quoting to Salomea Crăioc:

"*Oisive jeunesse à tout asservie... par délicatesse... j'ai perdu ma vie...*"

She said, wondering:

"What are you saying, dear?"

The tireless Teddie was running from group to group.

"Are you having a good time? Honestly? Are you really having a good time? Wait till I put on a stunning one, *Chinatown, my Chinatown!*"

When Văgălău let her go, Sonia went towards Andrei, but Teddie gripped her by the hand:

"*The Sheik of Araby.* Come on!"

'When their dance is over, we'll go home,' said Andrei to himself. But that very moment Lucian's parents came to see how the young people were enjoying themselves. The couples stopped dancing. The lawyer Salvator Varga was tall and lean; his hair was very black and thick, but parted by a white lock right in the middle. His thick

red lips and his weak chin were in contrast with the straight line of his eyebrows, the harshness of his grey eyes and the proud, distant way he carried his head. Compared with him, Mrs. Varga was extremely insignificant. She looked far older than her husband. Her bony body showed under the folds of a black dress clinging to her broad hips; on her flat chest dangled a gold cross as large as an archdeacon's.

While Lucian, pale and frozen with embarrassment, was pretending to look out of the window, the lawyer kissed the young girls' hands, looking at them with hardly disguised lust; he paid them old-fashioned compliments, tapped the boys patronizingly on their shoulder, looked sternly at Teddie to say 'that'll do!' and then, discovering Andrei, stood for a moment in front of him, at a loss. He examined him with a puzzled look and whispered rapidly, but quite seriously:

"Before you leave... Oh no, not now, there's plenty of time, I must absolutely speak to you."

Andrei blushed, cursed Lucian inwardly and nodded. Meanwhile, Mrs. Varga had caressed the young girls' flushed faces:

"How pretty you are, my darling!" And to herself, harshly: 'Just a bunch of little whores.'

She gave the boys her hand to kiss:

"You've grown, Mr. Belega. You look like your father." Then, turning to Varga, she said humbly: "Come along, Salvator, let's leave the young people. We have our own guests to attend to."

Varga made a face which implied: 'I'm sorry I can't stay here with you.' He pointed to the half-empty bottles:

"Don't have too much liqueur. There's champagne coming."

"Hooray!" cried Văgălău foolishly, then, realizing he had made a fool of himself, he sang in the "scat" style: "Dah-dah-de-dee-dee-do-owah-owah..."

When the elderly people had left, there followed a few minutes of embarrassment, then the party went on.

'What am I doing here?' wondered Andrei. 'What indeed?' He went straight to Sonia, who was dancing with Olimpiu Hanganu, and said to her:

"Aren't you going home?"

"Oh, yes, let's go." And to Olimpiu: "I hope you don't mind, do you?"

Teddie who was ubiquitous indeed had heard them; he ran to the door, locked it and roared:

"What? Nothing doing. Those two want to leave."

They all came up to them, surrounded them.

"Why do you want to leave, old chap?" wondered Văgălău. "Didn't you hear? There's champagne coming."

Andrei waved his hand. Sonia was looking at him beseechingly. Lucian had not risen from the sofa, to show his indifference.

"All right," Andrei gave in. "We'll stay a little longer."

"Come on! Give him a chance to dance with the girl, boys," said Teddie laughing.

Andrei could hardly control his desire to strike him.

"Oh, no, it wasn't that... not at all... You see, I was tired and..."

He nodded to Sonia. She smiled at him shyly, then went up to Dan, dragged him by the hand and ordered:

"Come on, you bear, I'm going to teach you to dance!"

Realizing why she had done so, Dan got up stiffly.

"You'll be sorry. Say ta-ta to your shoes."

"You're going to listen now to *Mood Indigo* by Duke Ellington and his band."

"What's *Mooindigo?*" asked Muggsy as a schoolboy would.

"Just a mood," recited Teddie pleased to be able to show off how learned he was. "A mood in which anger, melancholy, bitterness have withdrawn to make room for solitary meditation..."

'I wish such a mood would come over me too,' thought Andrei bitterly. He felt he could no longer stand the whole lot of them and stole out of the room. He wanted to be alone. He crossed an oak-panelled entrance hall full of hats, umbrellas, gloves and overcoats, then entered the library. The lofty room was surrounded with dark bookcases: one side held the lawyer's handbooks and legal treatises, and the other Lucian's books: the whole Rumanian literature, the complete works of Voltaire, Diderot, Montaigne and Rabelais, then Baudelaire, Rimbaud; a splendid

edition of Villon, illustrated by Dubout; Balzac, Zola, Maupassant, and modern writers: Proust, Giraudoux, Anouilh, Gide. Andrei bitterly envied Lucian this library. Every time he lent him a book, Lucian would repeat, although he felt he was being mean: 'Mind you don't lose it, Andrei. You know that for me... books...'

From the drawing room a ray of light made its way through the thick unpolished panes of the glass-door, and the voices could be heard quite clearly. Andrei threw himself into a large comfortable grey leather arm-chair. He closed his eyes. He wanted to think of something else, of any silly thing, but couldn't, for the voices of the guests in the next room disturbed him. They were playing poker.

"Quite out of the question," Varga was saying convincingly. "Obviously the Reich is having difficulties, but it is out of the question. A country like Germany cannot be beaten so easily. A people who've given a Beethoven, a Goethe, a Koch and a Bismarck, and who have such a formidable army, I'm sorry, my dear Vîslan! Pray, forgive me."

"A clever man like you, Salvator, ought to realize we're on our last legs. I'm quite sure you've taken all precautions, all of them!" came the throaty laugh of Vîslan, the chief editor of the local paper "Tribuna Romînă" (The Rumanian Tribune). "We shall have to stand the racket, we, the scribes. But listen to me, ink has a splendid property: being essentially of a single colour, it may suggest all kinds of shades."

"Quite so!" said a cracked voice. "Quite so! Well said, Vîslan!"

Andrei wanted to get up and leave the room, but at that very moment Mrs. Varga remarked to the players:

"There's too much tobacco smoke here. I'd better open the library door for a moment. We're suffocating."

Andrei huddled deeper in his arm-chair. The ray of light that fell on the carpet like a wide path did not reach him. Through the open door Andrei saw the round table covered with a green cloth. At the head sat, as if on a throne, a person whom at first sight Andrei took for Iuliu Maniu: he was wearing the same black frock-coat, almost monastic in aspect, buttoned up to the four-inches high celluloid

collar and his hair was done in the same way — a severe Austrian parting on the right side of the head. He held his cards with a sort of loathing which was in contrast with the covetous look he cast now and again at the heap of chips and banknotes in front of him.

Beside him, hunched up fawningly on the edge of his chair, sat Ion Vîslan. He looked like a French Bohemian with his pointed beard. His hair thinning because of an incipient baldness fell in anaemic locks over his smooth forehead. He was wearing a new double-breasted suit and a dotted Schubert tie. As he wasn't a keen player, he never lost the opportunity of watching, while the others were bluffing, always ready to cheer up his partners in whatever mood they might be.

Apart from Mr. Varga there was still another man at the table. It was Doctor Borza, the chief health-officer of the town, a fanatic gambler. Every time Vîslan interrupted the game, he cast flashes of reproach from his pale blue eyes. He was very stout, as bald as an egg; his clothes were out of shape because of the rolls of fat on his body, and he kept sweating and mopping his brow, his neck and his thick palms with a white handkerchief as large as a sheet. At the far end of the room the ladies were seated on a sofa at a small round table with cakes and cups of coffee, gossiping anxiously.

"Three aces," said the old gentleman bending over the stakes.

"I'm sorry, Baron," said Vîslan with a polite smile, "full hand! Three queens!"

"And two kings!" burst out the old gentleman chuckling with excitement. "And two kings, man! Here they are," he said laying down the cards with his gnarled fingers trembling with excitement.

"I began with one ace and one king, believe me. I discarded two knaves!"

"No one can beat the baron at poker," said Vîslan, smiling pleasantly.

"Quite so!" muttered Maniu's double, collecting the money and the chips.

Some small change fell down and rolled away. With unexpected swiftness the old man bent down quickly and

picked up the coins which he inserted neatly into the rolls of money in front of him.

Vîslan laughed, then said, pleased that he could put in a *bon mot:*

"I remember reading that at a conference a certain... Taleyrun was playing poker with some Englishmen. An Englishman let some coins fall under the table and he went down on his knees to find them. Then that fellow Taleyrun set fire to a bundle of thousand-franc notes, to hold a light for the Englishman. And..."

Everyone was aghast at the blunder.

"The English are wise," said the old man nodding. "Most wise. Why, d'you think they'll leave us here with the barbarians?"

"Talleyrand's policy of that period could teach us many a lesson," said Mr. Varga.

He didn't know what exactly Talleyrand had done at Vienna, but he had a clear picture of his diplomatic craftiness and intelligence which had saved France in a very difficult moment of her history.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the old man. "Ha! ha!... We too have our Talleyrands."

"May God grant it!" said Varga devoutly.

"No doubt about it, Salvator!" lectured the old man. "We too have people who have kept aloof in the opposition. We told the little officer: 'Cut your coat according to your cloth, my boy, no more.' But the pox affected his brains. Well, it doesn't matter."

"I know," said Varga discreetly, "that Mr. Maniu..."

"Hush!" said the old man angrily, sprinkling saliva all around him. "*Prudentissimus et discretissimus.*"

"*Primum vivere, deinde philosophare,*" quoted the doctor nervously. He was the loser and started dealing the cards. Vîslan put in casually:

"I hear that Prince Ştirbey..."

"Ugh!" said the old man, in disgust, making a fillip at some invisible person. "Ugh!"

"It's high time something were done!" said the doctor, losing his temper. "D'you know that this bombardment alone has caused two thousand deaths? Not to mention the wounded and crippled. And. from what Colonel Papa-

state told me, there were only thirty-five planes. Thirty-five!"

"It is a terrible misfortune," said the old man shaking his head. "But in my time there was a saying: *Krieg ist Krieg*. What could the Allies do? Did the Germans not bomb them when they had the appropriate planes?"

"Well, but what about us? What did we ever do to them?" asked the doctor angrily. "Come, gentlemen, let's get on with our game."

"Listen, my friend," said the old man winking exaggeratedly with his left eye, with the stiff merriment of a tailor's dummy, "in Berlin people are telling one another a joke: there are two kinds of people in that city — optimists and pessimists. The optimists are those who are learning English and the pessimists are learning Russian. What are you, Vîslan?"

"Rumanian," sighed the journalist. "I'm bidding..."

"Me too, sonny!" said the old man cringingly. "My hand is not worth much, but..."

The doctor quickly reckoned to himself. He had lost about a thousand and five hundred lei and now he would have to win his money back. They would soon go to dinner and after that there was no chance whatever of taking up the game again.

"Three times your bid!" burst out the old man grandly.

"I'm also in," stuttered the doctor. He had three kings.

Vîslan and Varga put down their cards.

"I'm served," said the old man.

The doctor asked for two cards which he scanned anxiously, staining them with his perspiration. The other must have at least a straight.

"And still I think that the fact that he's left for Cairo has..."

"Let's play, for Goodness' sake!" bawled Borza. "One hundred lei."

"The Liberals have had their day," declared the old man, who had laid down his cards on the table indifferently. "It's not for me to talk now, the future will prove... A hundred did you say? Here it is... Give me..." He turned to Varga: "Our political experience, our prestige with the multitude..."

"Don't speak of prestige," said the doctor spitefully. "I was at Sibiu when Transylvania was ceded and a 'great' speech of Iuliu Maniu's was announced. Thousands of people gathered together... And what d'you think? Maniu gave up holding his speech, bidding us to obey and pray to God. D'you call that prestige?"

"How much did you bid? A hundred?" said the old man in surprise. "Oh, why should we play so stingily? Three times the pot!"

"All right. Another hundred..." 'If I just see him, I lose,' thought Borza. 'If I raise him... the old man is served... He's got chronical arthritis, atrophy of the liver which gives him his brown complexion,' he diagnosed venomously.

"Another thousand lei!"

The doctor threw down his cards.

"For politeness' sake!" he tried to explain with imbecile sarcasm.

"So? Then look at this, dearie."

The old man laid down on the table a knave, an ace, an eight, a king and a nine:

"There you are, Aesculapius! I was 'served'!... 'And his hand became a rake,' " he chanted.

Vîslan clapped his hands loudly. He picked up the doctor's cards.

"Three kings!" he said clapping his hands. "Three kings! And you dared play against the baron?"

Varga looked very embarrassed. He got up, lit a cigarette and went to close the library door. Then he caught sight of Andrei.

"You here?" he said in surprise. "Why... what's happened? Are you feeling unwell?" he inquired severely. Then, seeing it would be a way of relieving the tense atmosphere in the drawing-room, he took him by the arm, squeezing it hard, and before Andrei managed to realize what he was doing, he brought him into the room.

"See whom I've found in the library," he said cheerily. "This young man."

Vîslan shrugged his shoulders slightly, the doctor gazed at him with blind fury, the old man with icy indifference.

"Come and let me introduce you," Varga went on gayly. He held out his hand:

"Sir, this young man is my son's school-fellow. The one who... I've talked to you about him. In an exam paper he wrote there would be a revolution; anyhow, that's what I was told. This is Baron Romulus Papp of Zerind.

"Dear me! That pup!" said the baron laughing the wrong side of his mouth. And he offered him a cold, limp finger.

Blushing fiercely, Andrei felt a cold perspiration coming over him. He gulped down the lump he felt in his throat.

"Dear me!" said Baron Papp of Zerind, smacking his lips. "Come nearer and let me have a look at you. Was it you who... ?" and he turned towards Varga, expecting an acknowledgement.

Varga nodded, intimating he was surprised, somewhat shocked, but vaguely admiring such fiery youthfulness. As a matter of fact, the presence of Andrei in their house annoyed him and he feared the consequences his influence might have upon Lucian.

Andrei stood with bent head shaking with vexation. Mrs. Varga turned to offer him a seat:

"Sit down, my dear boy. What had mummy to say about what you did?" 'A mere nobody!' she added to herself spitefully. 'And Lucian just worships him. I wonder why? He's nice-looking, there's no doubt about it. The son of a petty railway official.'

Andrei sat down lightly on the edge of the chair. The baron kept staring at him. The fleeting flicker of his yellowish eyes, like a hen's, revealed an unconcealed interest, a certain amiability which perplexed Varga. 'The baron's dotty,' he thought.

"How old are you, young man?"

"Eighteen," said Andrei through clenched teeth.

"There! There!" said the baron, his pear-shaped head shaking like a pendulum. "And now just you tell us what you wrote in that paper of yours."

'The clumsy fool!' said the doctor to himself. 'The lad seems terribly upset! His pulse is throbbing irregularly. He's a sensitive nature, slightly bilious... I ought to

interfere; leave the child alone!... Damn the whole lot of them!'

"I expressed certain conceptions!"

"And what were they?"

"Oh, various conceptions..."

The baron's cheeks flushed. He seemed younger, all of a sudden. His eyes rivetted on Andrei, he moved his big yellow bony hands on the table, arranging his money: the small change to the left, the bulk of it in the middle and a few blue notes on the other side.

"Come on, tell us," he went on implacably, "what did you say in that paper of yours?"

"That..." Andrei inhaled deeply, then holding up his head, he said defiantly: "that the whole rotten structure is going to collapse any moment!"

"Andrei!" ejaculated Varga quite startled.

"The rotten structure!" chuckled the baron. "You don't say so! The rotten structure, eh?"

He motioned to him to bring his chair nearer, and with his right hand he opened Andrei's coat pocket a little, while with the left he swept into it the notes lying on the edge of the table. Andrei felt his heart beat frantically several times. He thought everybody was looking at him.

The baron spoke as though he were giddy:

"And they expelled you, didn't they? They chucked you out? Extraordinary! Extraordinary! Had I known, I could have... no... it's better so!"

Andrei could only repeat to himself: 'Those swine... those swine... those swine...'

"Take up a pencil!" ordered the baron abruptly.

"I haven't got one," Andrei answered hoarsely.

"Here you are," said Vîslan handing him his Pelikan fountain-pen.

"Write this down," continued Papp in the same tone. "Baron Papp of Zerind, 7, Episcopiei Street, second floor, telephone No 22-09. Should you ever be in trouble, or have any worry or unpleasantness, come and look me up. You will be received, without fail. Hope to see you soon."

He shook his hand, with all his fingers this time.

Andrei staggered out of the room and flung himself down on the library sofa. He hid his face in his hands. All the tears

he had kept back for so long, all the pain, the worry, the humiliation of the last days burst within him like an abscess. He had forgotten how to weep and now he was choking with sobs. 'Why did he give me money? Why ever?' He wiped his wet sticky cheeks with his coat sleeve. He felt more befouled than if he had been hurled into a cesspool. 'As one would give money to a buffoon whose trick was amusing.' He produced the bundle of notes from his pocket. He counted them... one... two... three... seven thousand. 'Father's monthly salary when he has no debts to square.' Yesterday his mother was saying: 'Octavian, we ought to see about firewood.' His father had bent his head, wounded in his pride as head of the family.

He looked at the money with loathing. Should he throw it away? That would be another silly thing to do. He would give it to his mother. He would find something to say... He must go home now... But first he would have to see Sonia home, as usual. Something icy stirred in him. How would he talk to her? Would he be able to find his usual tone, both indifferent and tender? He felt heart-sick, sore. He made for the bathroom.

When Andrei had gone, Baron Papp of Zerind declared pompously as if answering the silent questions written on every face:

"Some day the young man you have seen will be a sound political leader. His action, my friends, is an evidence of a cleverness and finesse that have astounded me. The great cynicism of his generation... Why, at his age we practised onanism, we read *The Sufferings of Young Werther*. And you hear what he said: 'The rotten structure'll collapse any moment.' This is not the last we'll hear of him. I wouldn't like to lose sight of him."

"He often comes here," stammered Varga bewildered.

"*Eheu, fugaces, Postume, Postume!*" sighed the baron. "Another game?"

"Dinner is served," said Mrs. Varga. "You'll excuse me for a moment."

She went out quickly and, just as she expected, found Andrei in the bathroom wiping his face with a towel. The startled young man was about to put it back, but she took it from him.

"I should like to ask you a favour," she said looking aside. "I hope you won't mind. You see, we've brought up Lucian for the position he deserves. He does not need to do... (she was about to say "any adventurous gestures") anything special to get on, does he? You have great influence over him..." And she added hurriedly: "Please leave him to his beliefs. To ours. Please, do..."

Andrei stood motionless, quite aloof.

"All right, madam. I won't come here any more."

"But that's not what I meant, my dear boy. We do not object, no, not in the least, to..."

'I mustn't lose my temper,' said Andrei to himself. 'What am I doing here among them? I ought to... Where? Where?'

"Don't you worry, madam!"

His smile, which showed his strong teeth, was, as usual, very attractive. Mrs. Varga breathed a sigh of relief that she hadn't offended him:

"We are glad that..."

Andrei bowed and left the room. Before opening the door of the drawing-room, through which still came the sound of that bitter, harsh music, so full of despair and resignation, he stopped and closed his eyes. 'So I've been kicked out... It's only what I deserved, nothing more. I'm a stranger here... everywhere.' He was so exhausted that he accepted this listlessly.

Sonia was playing chess with Dan, moving the men with a preoccupied air. Dan was laughing: "I've played the king's gambit. Your fate is sealed." The pale light of a lampshade gilded their faces. When they saw him, they both rose to their feet.

"Yes," smiled Andrei. "Yes, we'll go now."

In vain did Teddie try to detain them. He was afraid of what followed after those parties. His mother's reproaches: 'You've brought in all your good-for-nothings and all those flighty girls of yours. Look, they've stained my wallpaper. There's another piece of the crystal set smashed. And the dirt in this room, the smell of strong drinks, of perfume, of girl's hair... the restless night I'm going to have...'

But Sonia would not stay. She was dying to be alone with Andrei, to hear what had happened to him. She looked

at him. All his movements, the way of shaking hands with the others had something sad and tired.

Lucian was the last to shake hands. He went up to Andrei quickly.

"When will you come again?"

"I don't know," said Andrei with a sort of pity. He added: "I really don't know, Lucian."

Dan too came up to him.

"Shall I go home or wait for you?"

He had asked, because his aunt always wanted them to go home together. She thought Andrei did not look after his cousin, that he did not take him out enough.

"Come with us."

Sonia took each of them by an arm. Lucian stood at the gate a long time, looking at the desolate, deserted street.

On the way they talked about trifles, about books, schoolmasters, school-fellows. Several times Andrei looked stealthily at Sonia's profile. He squeezed her arm slightly. 'Oh, if only we could have a world of our own, with none of the impurities... Silly thoughts, the thoughts of an adolescent... A world of our own doesn't exist, and I have no right to dream of such a thing any longer...'

Dan kept talking, a thing unusual with him, and Andrei was grateful for it.

He was thinking of his poor theory which had impressed Lucian. 'We should clad our souls in an armour and thus become invulnerable.' But with Sonia all this had turned against him; he felt terribly lonely.

"Andrei," she asked, interrupting him, "what will you do now?"

He answered quickly, without thinking, almost startled:

"It'll be all right... I'll see..."

Very lightly, with a sliding movement, she drew away her arm. Andrei recoiled. 'She's angry,' he thought. 'Why doesn't she understand that I do not know either? That I cannot think of it?'

At the door of her house he shook hands with her and said:

"I'll call... some day." And he tried to convey by these words all that he could not say to her. "I'll call.

Maybe together it won't be so difficult. Maybe we'll find... Maybe..."

"So long, boys!"

The door clicked. Andrei felt his heart sink at the thought of the night awaiting him. If only he could sleep. And the money? He sighed uneasily, as if something was weighing on his chest. Dan who was walking with his usual swinging gait leaned casually against Andrei's shoulder. He could do no more. And the money? Suddenly cheered, Andrei remembered what rotten luck his father always had at cards.

'I'll say I've gambled with friends and won two thousand. If it works, so much the better.'

His mother was waiting for them in the kitchen. She was glad to see them together.

"Have you had a nice time?"

"So, so," answered Dan yawning.

Meanwhile Andrei had gone into the bedroom, opened the cupboard where he kept his books and hid the five thousand lei there.

Then, while Dan was undressing, he came back to the kitchen and with a wide gesture handed the rest to his mother.

"Take it, madam. Today I too have started earning money."

"Where did you get it?" she asked, anxious rather than surprised.

"I won them at poker, my lady. It's a sum, isn't it?"

"Andrei!"

She shook her head incredulously. He added merrily:

"Don't let on to the old man. You know how he is about cards. But you see, sometimes one is in luck... I kiss your hands, I'm off to bed."

He got into bed and closed his eyes. He felt so tired. But just as he was falling asleep, his father in his embroidered night-shirt shook him by the shoulder:

"Come to the kitchen!"

Andrei followed him, dizzy with sleep. Sabin stopped in front of him. His father's eyes had such a pained look that Andrei became wide awake. Sabin sighed, then quite unexpectedly boxed his ears.

"Why?" shrieked Andrei. "Why?" 'He's found out!' rang within him a cry of alarm.

"To teach you not to play cards!" the old man cried out with sorrow in his voice.

Andrei couldn't help laughing, and that appeased his father.

"All right, father, I'll never play again. It was the first time, in fact, and..."

"Go to bed!" shouted Sabin in a dignified tone. "It's past midnight."

Walking on tiptoe, they both entered the room.

CHAPTER IV

Andrei was chopping firewood at the back of the courtyard. It was a cloudy morning and the sky was of a quaint rusty colour. Dan had left for the country the day before, but Andrei had refused to accompany him. When he had said resolutely that he wasn't going anywhere, his father looked at him deeply moved. "It's surely because the boy doesn't want to leave us." But it was something quite different. Andrei realized that sooner or later his father would hear of his being expelled. Although he dreaded what was sure to follow, he would not run away. He would try and explain to them; maybe they'd understand him after all.

During these last few days he had got thinner. He kept casting anxious glances around him, he was restless. His

mother urged him: "Go out, Andrei, and have a good time," but he only shrugged. Where could he go? All day long he went on chopping wood as if in a passion; he wished to tire himself out sos to a sleep like a log. The days dragged on slowly, crawling along like an animal with a broken back. Every time he heard the gate open, Andrei started; the expectation was oppressive, unbearable. 'If only they'd hear about it and everything would be over!'

When he saw his father rushing into the house, the perspiration streaming down his face, he knew that somebody had finally told him. He heard the passage door bang, and stuck his axe into a log. His forehead and cheeks began to burn, he felt hot all over. The narrow courtyard, full of cases and of crooked flower-beds seemed an unreal scenery, a jumble of unknown things. He stood there, he didn't know how long, until he heard his mother's trembling voice call:

"Andrei, father wants you." He locked the woodshed and entered the house. It seemed to him that all the familiar things there — the table, the sideboard, the cheap chairs — stood frozen in their place, and that the space between them had become solid, impenetrable. For a moment he recalled — as though he were looking once more at a mawkish picture — his early life, so carefree, a prolonged and invaluable childhood. Then he looked up. Sabin, helpless and as white as a sheet, was leaning against the table. There was such despair in his face, that Andrei forgot all the words he had meant to say although he had repeatedly rehearsed them beforehand. His mother, standing in a corner, was looking furtively from one to the other. Like Andrei, in moments of great ordeal, she didn't know what to do with her hands.

"Andrei," spoke his father in a low, feeble voice, "what have you done, Andrei?"

He remained dumbfounded, as if he had not expected the question. 'Lord, what am I to tell them?' he thought in despair. 'The truth they can't understand, and now I cannot, I am not able to lie.' He felt that his parents were now expecting from him this very lie, anything to enable them to believe him and stand by him. He said

nothing. 'If only it would come to an end! Father will fly into a passion, he will strike me. And that is as it should be. If it only were over!'

"Why don't you answer?" Octavian was speaking with difficulty as from afar when one feels that one must shout to make oneself heard but one's voice is too feeble. "Father wants to understand you..."

He would have preferred anything now, except this almost humble expectancy of a word supposed to explain what could not be explained. He mustered all his strength and whispered:

"I... I couldn't... I wanted to..."

It was useless. He gave up looking for suitable words.

"What did you write in that paper... for which you were expelled?"

Andrei was helpless, he said nothing.

"We have put by for you every penny we could," whispered his mother. "We've denied ourselves every pleasure. We have not lived... Only to spare you the discomforts of poverty..."

"I wrote that one cannot go on living in this world," Andrei hardly managed to say.

This sounded stupid. He had no one to defy here at home.

His father was looking at him in painful surprise. Then he suddenly broke into tears. He tried to control himself, but didn't succeed; his flabby cheeks became grotesquely distorted.

Amazed, Andrei leaned against the wall. Ana went quickly up to Octavian but didn't dare put her hand on his shoulder.

"Come, come, calm yourself, dear. Just drink a glass of water." Then, turning towards Andrei: "You wretched child!"

Andrei said nothing. 'Poor mother, she's trying to soothe the two of us now, but later, when she's alone...'

Octavian pulled violently at his tie to straighten it, staggered to the sink, washed his face and wiped it with his handkerchief.

Andrei took a deep breath, as before diving.

"Please... do not think of it any more... I shall work... I shall do anything to..."

"Shut up!" roared his father turning to him. His voice broke: "You wretch!" and he rushed out of the room.

"Run after him, run!" urged his mother quickly. "Please, talk to him!"

Andrei overtook his father just when he was opening the gate. He gripped him by the sleeve, but all his father managed to say, without looking at him, was:

"It were better... you hadn't been born."

He was off. Andrei followed him with his eyes, in despair. 'If he'd come back, oh, if he'd only come back!'

Octavian was walking hurriedly, his heels striking the pavement. But, before turning the corner, he straightened his bent shoulders, and this gesture affected Andrei more than his father's tears. 'Now I'm all alone,' he thought. 'That was all...'

He entered the house. shuffling his feet. His mother was mechanically clearing the table, moving the dishes uselessly from one side to the other. Her hands were trembling and a plate fell down and broke. Andrei darted forward, knelt down and started gathering the fragments.

"Leave them alone," she said pushing him aside. "Leave them. I shall sweep them up."

Andrei got up slowly, heavily. He stood there for a moment, rocking himself, then went to the bedroom and dressed. He neither knew why he was dressing nor where he wanted to go. He sat down on the edge of the bed, as if on an unfamiliar thing. He couldn't think of anything; then he felt he was choking. He went out quickly.

"Where are you going, Andrei?"

"I'm going out for a short walk," he answered evasively.

"Where to?"

"To Uncle Gavril's. I'm going to..." In the doorway he turned round and, rushing to his mother, took her into his arms. He could not cry. He was so tense that every movement hurt him. He stroked her thin shoulders and felt the sickly smell of cooking exhaled by her dressing-gown. It was made of ordinary calico, faded and threadbare.

"I couldn't stand it any longer," he groaned. "All our life... so shallow... I dread to think of leading the life you've led... I couldn't... Forgive me."

"You've always been dissatisfied," whispered his mother, still holding him tight in her arms.

She added in such a low voice that Andrei wondered if it had been she who had uttered the words... "Just like me..." A wave of hope filled his heart: he wasn't alone. But she asked with naive expectation:

"Do you think they'll forgive you ?"

"I don't know," lied Andrei.

"Go to your Uncle Gavril. He knows many influential people, he's so clever. All the teachers are indebted to him."

"I'll go," he acquiesced. "Right now."

"Wait, let me arrage your shirt-collar. And mind how you talk to him. Flatter him just a little. You know how simple folk are."

"All right, all right!"

"But you haven't had anything to eat today. Let me make you a cup of coffee."

"I'm not hungry now." He managed a smile, although it was terribly difficult. "It's all right, mother. I'll become a doctor, don't you worry..."

On his mother's pale and whithered face Andrei could read clearly that she didn't believe it any more than he did.

Although Andrei had always felt attracted by the personality of his Uncle Gavril, he didn't go to his place very willingly, especially of late. Gavril, the eldest of the Sabin brothers, was a queer man. In his youth he had been the terror of Beiuş, a little town in the mountain region, where their father, old Avram, was a carpenter. The old man had been a hard toiler and had sweated his children five days a week. On Saturdays he used to go to Grosz Berci's pub where he played *ferbli* and drank without stopping till Monday morning, not caring what went on at home. His eleven children grew up like vagabonds in the dust of Burgundia Mare Street. Their mother had died when Octavian was ten. It was on a Saturday when two of their foals had run away. They couldn't get Avram to leave the pub, and when his wife came for the fifth time to fetch him, he gave her just one blow with his fist in her chest. Three days later Maria died. From that moment Avram never crossed the threshold of a pub again,

in all his life. For a time he saw to it that the children learnt a trade, but afterwards he found a lady-love, a widowed midwife, with whom he ate up all his money. It was Gavril who had all the care of the shop. Gavril was a giant of a lad, of a tremendous strength. It was said that he could have fought ten people at a time, and when he was in his cups and suddenly ordered everybody out of the pub, they got up from the tables and stole away like dogs with their tails between their legs. When the First World War broke out, the brothers scattered in all directions. Four died in Russia, one was killed at Caporetto, another came back without his legs and hanged himself in the stable; the third came with his lungs bullet-riddled and died soon after. About 1924, Gavril came back too; he had travelled all over half of Europe and from Adrianople he had brought his steed back, an Arabian thoroughbred, with which he rode into the café, making it stand on its hind legs. He had heaps of money, all in gold coins, which did not last long. In vain did Octavian beg for some of the money to pay his fee at the Normal School. Gavril seemed to have taken leave of his wits. One day he told his father he was going to marry Bertha, the daughter of a German dressmaker who had settled in the town. The old man answered nothing, got up, took his adze and struck him on the forehead. Gavril went away, the blood streaming down his face. For six years he never talked to his father. He had married the German girl and had found a paltry job: he was a beadle of the church on the hill. He rang the bells, swept the chancel and during the Easter services he fired a small brass cannon. The town had forgotten him, and only the old folks wondered at him, unable to recognize in this flabby-cheeked man the bull-like lad he had been erstwhile. When Octavian had gone to school, and then studied four years at the Normal School, God only knows how, the old man went to live at Gavril's. But till the day of his death he never spoke a word to his daughter-in-law, as if she'd been a mere shadow. His grandchildren, two rather dull boys and an elder girl, fair and quiet, he would hit spitefully, on the sly. But in spite of all the insistences of his two other sons, Octavian and Corniță, who had also married and asked him to come and live with them,

the old man shook his head and answered evasively: "I haven't the time!"

In the winter of 1940 they found him frozen to death at the back of the house. The same year Gavril moved into town, because he'd had a fight with Archdeacon Mihăluță, in the church. He found a small job at a co-operative store; as warehouse-man. Here, prodigious swindling was carried on. They wetted the wool and kept back half of it; they mixed corn with cockle; they sold tons of sugar on the black market. The whole managing staff of the co-operative made a fortune in two years. Gavril had so much money that he didn't know what to do with it. He had bought himself successively about eight old cars and turned them into taxis; he owned in town four houses which he made over to his wife and children; he bought a farm in the country in partnership with lawyer Motzeanu, a member of the co-operative council; he had thirty-eight suits of clothes, got his sons exempted from going to the war, and married his daughter to a high-school teacher. In 1943 the co-operative were to deliver a train-load of sugar to Germany. Taking advantage of the fact that the Americans had bombed a railway junction, two hours before the train had passed there, Gavril together with Motzeanu pretended the sugar had been destroyed, and deposited it in several villages, with very trustworthy people. Although he had been offered to enter the co-operative managing council, Gavril had refused, saying he was quite content with his job. He was a sullen man and didn't speak more than ten words a day. So terribly did he bully the peasants who sold their produce to the co-operative, so loudly did he bawl at them, that the windows rattled and the people fled all in a sweat, glad they had got away. His two brothers admired him, acknowledging his undeniable authority. In spite of that, when he suggested Octavian should become his partner, Andrei's father refused.

"You've been born a fool and will die one," scolded him Gavril crossly. "You will die in the gutter, a pauper."

Ana only called on them once a year. Then her sister-in-law laid the whole contents of her wardrobe out in front of her, crushing her with their riches. Ana came

away humiliated, saying she would never go to their house again.

This always started a quarrel with Octavian.

"I won't have you call my brother names, do you hear? He is a wonderful man, that's what he is!"

Gavril was very fond of Andrei, but didn't know how to show his fondness. He always gave him money and, in order to hide his embarrassment, although no one else was present, he spoke gruffly to him:

"Here! You need a little of this!"

When he was a child, Andrei used to imagine God to be somehow like Uncle Gavril: gruff but kind. Later on, when he went to their house, he felt the same dissatisfaction as at home: trivial, mean interests, a useless existence...

He was too restless to wait for the tram and, although Gavril's house was a long way off, he started on foot. The solution came to him: he would ask his uncle to take him into the business, he would make lots of money and then... this situation could not last long. The Germans would lose the war, they simply must lose it. He crossed the square which was swarming with people, but when he got to the other side of it, he hesitated for a moment. Father Potra was coming straight up to him, smiling. He couldn't avoid him; therefore he hurried on, frowning, to show he had no time to spare. But Potra walked up, held out his hand and, eyeing him inquisitively, asked:

"Your parents are surely very glad now, aren't they, my dear boy?"

"Very!" was Andrei's rude reply. Potra chuckled as though he were pleased.

"Did you think of them when you..." Andrei thrust his chin out, aggressively:

"Don't be so damned pleased. Maybe a time will come... when you'll rue it..."

He was ashamed of the vulgarity of his words and frowned. The priest was laughing.

"It's your damnable conceit that has ruined you, Andrei. You have done and you will do great harm to those around you. Your parents have brought you up badly and now they're paying for it."

"You know what?" cried Andrei and was about to swear at him, but he controlled himself. "Good day, or to speak more like a Christian: blessed be... and so on."

"Come and see me some day!" cried Potra after him.

'Go to the devil. How long shall I have to go on explaining and justifying myself? 'They' want me to feel guilty, to be sorry...' He kicked a stone, viciously.

When he arrived at the "Prosperitatea" co-op store, the vast courtyard was full of wagons and peasants; the horses were eating dry straw; the children were playing among the husks. From the warehouse came his uncle's booming voice. But before going to him, he would have to enter the house and keep up a polite conversation for half an hour.

His aunt, a tall, and always jolly fat woman received him merrily, put her white, flabby arms round his neck and said compassionately:

"How thin you are!... Rodica! It's Andrei!" She pushed him into the small room, amazingly crowded with all sorts of things, and put a tray with fruit before him.

"Help yourself, you've grown so thin!" Rodica came immediately. She was wearing a flowery silk dress and high-heeled shoes. She smelt of expensive perfume. She sat down beside him and started chattering away with gusto, laughing mincingly. She told him that it was so nice to be married, and winked to intimate what she was hinting at.

Andrei was silent and continued to eat his green pear.

"You would hardly believe it. Liuț seems such a milk-sop when you look at him. He does, really. But he's so clever, you know... I'm perfectly happy." She yawned and stretched herself, mindless of showing her plump knees. "Would you like me to tell you about it?" she asked, wetting her lips with her whitish tongue.

"Do you know that I've been expelled from all the schools in the country?" asked Andrei.

"Oh!" Rodica stood open-mouthed, then started crying, genuinely distressed, and embraced him:

"Oh dear, how horrible! What did auntie say? Does she know? Do you want to run away from home? Oh!..."

She wiped away her tears and, pressing her lips against his ear, asked: "Why? Have you... a girl?"

"No,no," laughed Andrei, setting the pear back on the tray. "I wrote a paper. They didn't like it at school and... that was all..." 'How queer — he observed — this cannot be related. It's as if you wanted to explain why you are wicked.'

"It's a lie! You're a bad sort, I know you. I saw you with a girl. Yes, she was beautiful. I've lost my looks, but I don't care. Liuț will always love me, and if he's unfaithful to me, I'll do the same to him. It's not difficult to find a lover. Yes," she said spitefully. "If he's unfaithful, I'll pay him back with his own coin."

Andrei said nothing. He felt embarrassed.

"I'll be going now, Andi darling. I am going to the high-school. There's a lady-teacher there and... I'm jealous, that's what it is."

Left alone, Andrei looked round the room. On a wall hung the picture taken at Rodica's wedding: she, beaming, her eyes cast down in nervous shyness as becomes a young bride; he, tall and stiff, but looking as dismal as though he were condemned to death. A high-school master. He had married to be rid of poverty.

Andrei went out. He crossed the courtyard and entered the warehouse. In front of a huge pair of scales his uncle, with rolled-up shirt sleeves revealing his arms, red as if scalded, was motioning to a terrified young man. He looked somewhat like Octavian, but was much fatter. The top of his head, shaved with the razor, shone brightly. He kept pushing forward his huge belly, as if wanting to put it on the scales and thus increase the weight of the bags. He saw Andrei, but said nothing. Only when the latter had greeted him, he growled:

"Hello! What's up?"

"I should like to talk to you," stammered Andrei,

"I'm busy."

"I'll wait a little, if you don't mind."

"Please yourself."

He turned to a shrivelled-up peasant-woman, who was struggling to drag a bag:

"Why are you hustling, woman? Are you in such a hurry? Is your sweetheart waiting for you?"

"I'm in a hurry, Mister Gavril, sir, for I..."

"No more of your lip. Come on, come on, put it there! Look sharp!"

He handled the weights hurriedly and shouted to a bald-headed man wearing lustrine sleeves, who was writing into an account book:

"51.30! Come on, the next!"

The woman stared at him incredulously, then, catching at his sleeve, said with fear in her voice:

"I can't believe it, Mister Gavril, sir. I weighed it at the city hall. It's a big bag... all our bags are the same... It was 60 and..."

"Go about your business, wench!" said Gavril sharply. "Are you suggesting that I'm blind, you shame-faced hussy? Come, off with you!"

A navvy, the sweat streaming down his face, had emptied the bag on to a huge pile of wheat.

"Here's the receipt," said Gavril handing it to her. "Go to the co-op store. You can get anything there: salt, sugar and even silk knickers. Good luck to you."

The whimpering woman couldn't bring herself to leave.

"My husband'll beat me, Mister Gavril. Even so he calls me a fool."

Gavril took her by the shoulders and pushed her gently out, among the other peasants who were waiting for their turn.

"They'll drive me mad," he said aloud, then took a bag, opened it and thrust his arms in, up to the elbows; he became red with fury. He started bawling at a lad who was standing at attention in front of him:

"You, the Dobries, I've always known you to be thieves! Do you call this wheat? You p...d on it, haven't you, to make it weigh more? We don't need it. Go!"

"Dad said that..."

"Fifth category!" Gavril waved him away. "And this just out of pity. Off with you. Come on, or I shall kick your backside, you..."

"Father'll beat me..."

"Beat him too."

Suffocated by the dust which was rising up from the wheat winnowed by two men, Andrei was coughing and feeling miserable. He was ashamed of his uncle and felt ill at ease. He tried, without being noticed, to see what the people there thought of his uncle's behaviour, but he only saw smiles of admiration.

"There's a man for you," said a clerk passing quickly between the piles of wheat. "If it weren't for him, the co-op would go to the dogs."

After that, Gavril almost had a fight with a lean-looking peasant sporting an impressive moustache. They swore at each other freely; finally they came to an agreement and went to the co-op pub to drink a glass of spirits. Andrei stood up too. He shyly avoided the group of peasants who were waiting silently and listlessly. One of them was saying casually:

"That's the way money's made, for the peasant is just a commodity..."

In the pub situated immediately by the warehouse, so that the money shouldn't go too far, the peasants were crowding round the squalid tables, with glasses of rye-brandy in front of them. It was terribly hot, and the flies were swarming everywhere, as if drunk. Gavril stood leaning on the counter, and was emptying his bottle. The moustached peasant, leaning towards him, was telling him excitedly:

"Upon my word, Mr. Gavril. Just listen, may God strike me dead if I lie... A new threshing-machine, from Russia. We'll make... a hundred thousand before summer's out. May I be damned if it's a lie."

When he saw Andrei, Gavril seemed to remember something.

"Come here, my lad!" he said commendingly. "How is your mother, your father, hey?"

"Fairly well, Uncle Gavril. They're both in good health."

"Have a liqueur? Petre, a cherry-brandy! This is my nephew. The first!"

"I see," said the peasant. "May God grant you all happiness."

Andrei was clasping the glass in his clammy hand.

"Drink it, I'll stand you another."

"Uncle Gavril, I came to ask you, if is it possible..."

"Mr. Gavril!" called someone from ouside. "Come out, Mr. Flondor's come!"

"I'd like to ask you to..."

"All right, all right..."

Gavril fumbled in his pocket, took out a 2,000 lei banknote and handed it to him.

"Here!" he said. "Now I've given you something." He went out quickly, leaving Andrei stunned.

"The milk of human kindness," said the peasant. "He is as kind as a minister."

Andrei realized he was still holding the money in his hand, and thrust it into his pocket, rather ashamed. 'The same thing's occurred twice,' he said to himself. 'Maybe this has a meaning.' He thought stubbornly that he must get a job as clerk here. If his uncle wouldn't listen to him, he'd talk to the manager. The more so as the latter was an old friend of his father's. He climbed the steps to the manager's office firmly. "Prosperitatea!" A lot of people were waiting. In the narrow passage whose walls were covered with all sorts of posters: "Hush! The enemy is listening!" "Put money aside for your old age!" "Drink is the mother of all evils!" etc.; Elbowing his way, Andrei entered an office from where the rattling of a typewriter was heard.

"Is the director in?" he asked, trying hard to put on an absorbed business-like air.

"No," answered a junior clerk, his nose shiny with perspiration. "There's only Doctor Motzeanu, the councillor. Whose name shall I give?"

"I've been sent by Mr. Gavril..." answered Andrei quickly, so that he shouldn't be able to retreat.

A few minutes after, the clerk showed him in. A sturdy, very well-dressed man was seated before a simple desk covered with files. He had grey hair, ruffled like a mane, and a big died moustache covered his upper lip. Engrossed in his papers, he motioned to Andrei to sit down, signed several receipts and then turned and asked almost harshly:

"What does Gavril want? Has Flondor arrived?"

"I don't know," whispered Andrei. He was on tenterhooks. "I am his nephew," he stammered.

"What do you want?"

"I came to ask you... that is my uncle is asking you... to give me a job here."

Motzeanu eyed him critically, raising his bristly eyebrows.

"Young man," he said reproachfully, "did your uncle send you here?"

"Yes," lied Andrei, blushing.

"What's your name, young man?"

"Andrei Sabin."

"Oh yes, I see..." Motzeanu scratched his forehead and finally remembered something:

"Did you say Andrei Sabin? Aren't you by chance a friend of Lucian Varga's?"

"Oh yes, I am!" Andrei hurried to reply. Motzeanu rose with a dignified air:

"Then you are the young man whom Mr. Varga was telling me about, who has been expelled from high-school."

Andrei turned pale. Again? Here too?

"Yes," he said painfully, "but I think... that's got nothing to do with..."

"You've ruined your career, young man. You have broken your parents' heart. How could you have done such a thing? In my time such acts would have brought about a much more severe punishment. As to us, we had other preoccupations. We fought, young man, for our national ideal, against the Hungarian fiends, we suffered in prisons."

Andrei kicked his chair aside. He sighed.

Motzeanu, thinking he had impressed him, stepped forward:

"You see, young man..."

"Good day," said Andrei in a low voice. He turned on his heels and went out.

It was only in the street that he noticed that his shirt was wet with perspiration. The town was bathed in a strong, glaring light. For a moment he longed for Lucian's presence: for a talk as of old, about books, pictures, or to listen to music with eyes shining with excitement, as if nothing had happened. No, it couldn't be, he belonged "there" no longer. Nor could he go to Sonia's; she couldn't help him at all with what he was going through now. It was

like a painful disease. She would have asked him, at least. to explain himself; she would have listened to him and tried to encourage him childishly — and he hadn't the strength to accept it.

During his absence his mother had been weeping; her eyes were red and she looked at him without that warm, understanding brightness they had had in the morning. 'She is suffering because of me, and this estranges us. She is suffering alone because she doesn't understand. She cannot understand.'

She laid the table and Andrei ate hurriedly, guiltily. Octavian came at about 5, slightly tipsy, lost in a sullen silence. He wouldn't answer any of Ana's questions, who was trying with obvious awkwardness to turn his thoughts into another direction. From their room Andrei heard him answering rudely. "Leave me alone, will you?" Then the old man came to lie down on the old leather couch. He undressed carefully, folded his trousers neatly, without ever looking at Andrei. He lay down, his face upwards, and crossing his arms on his chest, closed his eyes. Andrei couldn't help thinking that his father was acting. With a sudden start he realized that he didn't care any longer about anything, not even about the oppressive atmosphere that reigned in the house and would last for weeks. His father was quite capable of sending him to Coventry for a long time, of isolating him stubbornly. He knew all this. Then his mother would be sorry for him, she would talk to him on the sly, trying to show him that she had forgiven him and that she was on his side — all this with a slight air of complicity, as if she were obliged to hide her feelings. 'We are like shadows,' he thought. 'If only we could find a common language! If we were not stifled by... By what? Maybe by this sort of life...'

It seemed as if he had been plunged in the depths of a cave where, after having tired out his lungs trying to breathe the rarefied air, he was overcome by a sort of listless dizziness.

Octavian had fallen asleep and was snoring a little. Whenever he had any trouble, Andrei tried to get rid of it in a special way: he imagined an isle where he had been

shipwrecked, together with all his acquaintances, boys and girls... They started living a new life, from the beginning; new ties were formed. But now in front of his closed eyes no such image appeared and the effort of evading made him anxious. He would have liked time to stand still...

Somebody had come into the kitchen; oh yes, it was Iurcovici's wife who was helping mother with the dishes. She is sure to want something again, but she doesn't dare ask for it. His mother was talking about him:

"You know, Florica, he is the best in his school, in the whole school. The masters are amazed when he answers..."

"Yes... Mrs. Ana..."

"And now he has written a wonderful paper... You know how this world is... There are many envious, wicked people..."

"Yes, of course, Mrs. Ana. That's also what my poor Ludovic always says. And no matter how much he looks for work..."

"And now they have found fault with this paper of his. They grudge him his having done better than the prefect's son."

"That's the way these fine people are, Mrs. Ana. They want to be the only ones to..."

"But his father won't give in. He is going to write to the Marshal himself, if necessary. They will take him back..."

"How's that, Mrs. Ana, have they expelled Master Andrei?"

Ana began to weep.

Andrei tossed about in his bed, his fists clenched. It was dreadful. Here, things lost their outline, became shapeless, un-understandable and incontrollable.

'They will never be able to understand me, as they don't understand anything, not even what enters their circle of preoccupations... They don't understand their own life.'

He tried to imagine his father as a young man, aspiring, looking for something, but he couldn't.

"Mrs. Ana, I'm so ashamed... If there's anything left over from dinner... For the children... The wretch,

damn him... He hasn't found work again. Oh... It would have been better if I had married that other man who wanted me to be his wife when I was a girl! Now he has his own shop at Lipova... Thank you, God bless you..."

"Wait a moment, I want to show you something. I've bought Andrei a pair of sandals. I shall give them to him when Octavian's anger will have passed."

"Oh dear, how pretty they are! Oh, how wonderful! The leather's so fine..."

Almost horrified, Andrei stopped his ears.

But during the following days his parents' silence became unbearable. At table he tried to eat well, although each mouthful was painful. Only once did he say "I can't eat," and then his father looked up from his plate. He seemed to ask him:

'What! Is it for you to sulk? How dare you?'

He spent all his time idling about the house, to be at hand in case his mother might need anything. But she never asked him to do anything. One morning she said to him:

"Put on a clean shirt, don't you see the one you've got on is dirty? I'll wash it."

"It can still do... You work enough as it is..."

"And when did you start to care about that, Andrei?"

Then he felt like screaming out, but he controlled himself. He took the clean shirt, put it on. He had to go somewhere, anywhere, only to escape from here. While looking for a book, he came across his papers and turned mechanically the pages of his diary.

The sentences seemed unfamiliar, as if written by somebody else. He read at random:

Luc. asked me:

What is left to man if he kills God? I didn't answer him then. I've been thinking it over for a long time, and now I know: He is left his own self, he is left bold and free. I'll tell him tomorrow.

On another page:

It is such a calm, splendid evening. I am happy. I feel confident I shall really do something in life. I will never

sell myself. I will never stoop, lower myself in front of anybody. A real man hasn't the right to do this. Today, at L.'s house we listened in to the Vth Symphony. For a long time after, we sat silent, deeply stirred. To be as free as Beethoven, free from any mean humiliation, to be more of a man than all men put together.

And further:

I loathe hypocrisy more than anything else. It's a torture for me to have to talk during the scripture class of the unique God in three hypostases, without shouting that I do not believe in all such stuff!

I can only believe in what I understand! Nor do I want to believe in anything else! I am an atheist. L. wonders if this doesn't lower a man; I think that, on the contrary, it frees him. Only the weak need to believe in something, to know that they are supported by something superhuman. A real man, even when all alone, can face anything...

'Oh, blessed simplicity!' laughed Andrei bitterly. Although these pages represented the essence of his creed, he now regarded them with a sort of pity and annoyance. However, he took them with him. He wanted to go somewhere out of the town, on the banks of the Mureș, to be alone.

His mother didn't ask him anything.

He passed through the town almost at a run and at noon had got as far as the fields. From there the town seemed a heap of tortoises with their shells shining in the sun. In front of him stretched the steppe bathed in light, fields of still unripe corn, a dusty, narrow lane. A humming, lively silence. From the left you could hear the rippling of the Mureș; between the trunks of the willow-trees there shone from time to time an eddy sparkling in the light. After a while Andrei stopped. He had discovered a sort of island with a small beach; the sand there had the golden colour of a crust of bread. The Mureș had separated into two, and the contrast between the restless thread of water which flowed bubbling on one side, and the calm gliding of the massive waters on the other, was so striking that they seemed two different rivers. Andrei stripped and

stretched down on the sand. Presently a welcome torpor came over him. The sun was caressing his lips, his eyelids. There was a smell of sunshine, rotting herbs, water.

Later, Andrei began to swim: he let himself be carried forward, wafted by the soft, lively waves. From time to time a cold current coiled round his legs like a snake, making him shiver. Now it would be so easy to let oneself go, not to move one's hands any more, to sink slowly, slowly...

Andrei sank to the bottom, keeping his eyes wide open. When the water closed above him, he saw through the transparent sheet the cold, now far-off orb of the sun. His ears had begun to tingle. With a kick he came back to the surface and breathed greedily, lustfully. 'These experiments are not my line,' he thought. He came out on the beach and rolled over on the hot sand.

Silence...

At noon the shadows melted into the earth, only to return immediately, upside down. The colour of the water darkened, becoming mysterious; the osiers rustled. A white cloud, like a closed fist, dispersed slowly. In the distance some people were walking idly along a lane, raising small clouds of dust. A fish splashed on the mirror of the water, breaking it.

All seemed so far away from Andrei, and so unattainable, as it were. He was sad, but a strange calm enveloped him, as if he had never hoped for anything. He lit a cigarette and, lying on his back, watched the milky rings of smoke. 'Maybe I was too young to understand what loneliness means. I've always been afraid of it, foolishly, childishly...'

CHAPTER V

His earliest recollection was a big glass eye, as large as a man's head, in the shop-window of Steiner the optician. Every time his mother took him for a walk, he contrived to stop in front of that shop, amazed and delighted.

"Mother, buy me..."

When acquaintances who called at their house asked him what he would like to have, he would say without the slightest hesitation:

"The big eye at Steiner's."

This annoyed his mother so much that one day she entered the shop and asked if the big eye, on account of which she had no moment's peace, was for sale. Steiner

answered it was not. Then Andrei turned scarlet and shouted loudly:

"You're liars, all of you!"

His mother boxed his ears and dragged him out of the shop. It was early spring and the melting snow was of a dirty brown. Taking advantage of a moment when his mother wasn't looking, Andrei pretended to slip and flung himself down on the pavement, smothering his white fur coat.

"You're a naughty child, and mother will die."

"It doesn't matter," he answered revengefully.

He soon started wishing to have other things: a dwarf that would do whatever he ordered him, living leaden soldiers, a violin that could play by itself, a fireman's helmet. At her wit's end, his mother would tell him that such things did not exist, but in the evening Octavian promised to look for them and bring them to him. He was a nasty child. When they went to pay calls, he was sure to play some prank, despite all his mother's lectures. Once he said to the wife of the railway-company manager who was offering him a peeled tangerine.

"I won't have it from your vampire hands..." (The lady's nails were blood-red.)

At home, Ana gave him a good hiding, while Octavian just laughed. They could not send him to the kindergarten, because the first and only day that he went there he broke a little girl's head.

"Alright then," Ana would say shaking her head. "I'll send you to a reformatory."

"I don't mind. It's you who'll cry."

Every summer they used to go to the country, to Aunt Emilia's who was a school-mistress. Here Andrei, meekly followed by Dan, would get into all sorts of mischief: they would steal granny's kneading-trough and, using it as a boat, they would turn it over and tumble into the mud of the pond; they would set fire to the straw-rick standing in the yard, break the windows of the school or dig a hole in the wheat heaped up in the loft and bury themselves in it up to their neck in the golden grain — so that, when Octavian's rest leave came to an end, everybody breathed a sigh of relief to be rid of Andrei.

His mother tried to make him quieten down by teaching him to read when he was six, and Andrei took to reading with frenzy, but this made him only the more turbulent.

"Only school will get the better of you," Ana would say to him, threateningly.

She told him such dreadful things about school-teachers who struck children over the fingers with the ruler and locked them up in empty school-rooms till night, that the first morning he went to school, Andrei was as white as a sheet and shaking all over, although he tried not to show it. He gazed sadly after his parents, scarcely able to control his tears. The crowd of unknown children awed him, so that, when a second-form boy gave him a thrashing, Andrei just stood his blows and did not complain. He came home jumping on one foot and whistling to conceal the humiliation he had undergone. Hadn't his mother said: "You'll never be able to stay one day at school!..."

The teacher, Mr. Cosma Gavriş, was a stout man who had a fearful voice and kept picking his nose. During the first days he had made the children draw little circles and slanting lines on their slates for hours, while he slept peacefully snoring like a tom-cat. Feeling bored, Andrei wrote his name, the name of his street and of the town on his slate. When Mr. Cosma saw that, he was delighted. He appointed him monitor and left him alone after having handed him the rod, while he came in five minutes before the break to check how the pupils had got on with the drawing of hooks, circles and snakes.

Andrei would have been quite happy, had his parents not quarelled now and again. They did not do it in front of him, but he realized something serious had happened from the strained silence that pervaded the house several days running. He prayed God that he might fall ill and his parents make it up by his bedside, as had happened before.

At the end of the school-year he carried off the first prize and hastened to throw away his laurel wreath as soon as he went out the school-gate. He was friends with all the boys in the quarter near the station, where he lived; they all acknowledged him as their leader for he could invent no end of games; sometimes, however, he got tired of them. Then he would take a book and hide away in the yard

among some brambles and heaps of refuse. He would lie on his belly and examine the ground closely. After a while he would feel that he too had become smaller, had become a tiny insect, and the cracks in the ground seemed precipices. At other times one of his father's colleagues, a certain Constantinescu, would call on them; he was a swarthy-looking young man with thick and always dishevelled hair. He would lift Andrei up in his arms, kiss him and say:

"You little Rumanian stripling, what a sturdy man you'll grow into!"

He gave him a badge with a sort of swastika on it.

"Mihai, my boy, you'll catch it some day, you're bound to," Octavian used to say mildly.

"It doesn't matter... But I won't die before stamping out ten filthy Jews. The Jews are eating up our nation." He let Andrei play with his pistol, then turned severely to Sabin: "Listen, Tavi, I speak to you as to a friend. Those who are not with us are against us. And at the hour when the veil of the temple will be rent, our friendship will no longer count when the interests of the nation are at stake."

When Constantinescu left, Octavian took the badge from Andrei and threw it away into the privy.

"Decent chap, but dangerous. It's wise to be on good terms with them."

That year Andrei learnt many things. His cousin Rodica, who was paying them a visit, whispered to him one evening how children were brought into the world and, taking from the bottom of her suit-case a book by Lascarov Moldovanu, she read to him, holding her breath: "...pressing between her plump thighs the flesh that gave her pleasure..." The discovery was most painful to Andrei. So it meant that his mother too... No, it was impossible. But Rodica only laughed at him and, producing another book, showed him pictures of naked men and women.

"We can't do it yet, because we are too young..."

He tried to talk about those things with his friends, but they knew no more than he did. Then he asked their maid-servant Suzana, a sixteen-year old girl his mother had got from the orphanage.

Suzana had thick lips and a short flat nose. It was only when he had become friends with her that Andrei dared to

ask her openly about what was troubling him. At first she pretended to be shocked. "What would Madam say if she knew I told you such a thing?" Andrei entreated her, humbled himself and then only discovered that Rodica had been right. Tortured by a shameful curiosity, he asked Suzana to lift up her frock that he might see how a woman was made, but she pushed him out of the kitchen, laughing. Then he began pilfering money from the wardrobe to give to the servant who was extremely fond of the cinema whence she came back with eyes as red as blood with so much weeping. Finally, one day, when they were together in the wood-cellar, Suzana said:

"Shut your eyes and don't open them before I say: now!"

Andrei opened his eyes, stared for a moment, then turned on his heels and ran away.

For a few days he couldn't set eyes on her, but later on he noticed Suzana behaved as though nothing had happened. They became friends. Andrei would tell her the contents of the novels he read and was delighted when she wept at the dramatic moments he invented. At school he was looked upon as a sort of prodigy, because in a free composition on the crusades he had mentioned Godefroy de Bouillon and Richard Lion-Hearted, two names that he had learnt in the history books of Rodica, three years his senior.

"Godefrey des Bullion, Rickards..." Mr. Cosma had said solemnly, mispronouncing the names, "Sabin, my lad, you'll become a great historian like Mr. Neculae Iorga!" He had called him in front of the class and said to the boys: "Look at him, you blockheads! Try and become like him!"

Andrei had felt terribly ashamed; all day he felt he had behaved unfairly towards the other children.

In the last year of the elementary school he stopped learning. He had got in tow with two bigger boys, high-school boys who taught him to smoke and then to eat onion and garlic, so as not to smell of tobacco.

That summer they went to the country, so that Dan and Andrei might study together for the high-school entrance examination. Uncle George coached them and noticed

that gentle Dan had studied more thoroughly than his cousin. Andrei hadn't the slightest idea of mathematics, as for history, he knew certain things taught in high-school, but had never heard of others; he was very good at Rumanian, except grammar, but always wrote correctly, owing to all the reading he had done. Uncle George teased him once or twice on his ignorance, and Andrei, furious about it, swore that at high-school he would show them what he could do. While Dan was working at his problems, he wandered about the fields with his mother's brother, Uncle Palli, who was home to "pick up." He had been sacked from the factory where he worked, had sold all his clothes and belongings, so that now he was quite free. They caught carps and tench in the river, they went shooting with Ipu, the village watchman, proud of his huge flint-lock gun which boomed like a cannon. They indulged in all sorts of pranks.

Although Uncle Palli was the family "prodigal son," Andrei was fonder of him than of anybody else.

"They get on like brothers," the grandmother would say, and because of his devotion to her youngest and unhappiest son, she began to love Andrei, whom she had not cared for before, as he was impertinent, conceited and careless about his clothes.

Andrei passed his entrance exam very well. He had only made one mistake in mathematics, but Dan did even better, as he obtained the highest marks possible. Aunt Emilia was terribly glad of such a success and didn't try to conceal her satisfaction, which hurt Andrei very much. The same as in his first days at the elementary school, he felt shy here, among so many strangers; he happened to belong to a form in which he knew no one except Dan. From the very first day Micky Belega, a tall, strong, very good-looking boy, the son of a general, distinguished himself. He looked down upon every one during the break; he licked a smaller boy and, during the scripture lesson, while Father Crăioc (they had already learnt that his nickname was "Billy-Goat") was talking to them about the catechism, he spread a napkin on his form, produced buttered bread and ham from his satchel and started eating it composedly.

"What are you doing there, you scamp? What's your name?"

"Mihail Belega, Father."

"The general's son?"

"Yes..."

"Oh, you should not eat in class, my child. Wait till the bell rings."

The children were awaiting the following lesson with fear in their hearts. They were to make the acquaintance of Mr. Drăgan, the French master, the terror of the school. A death-like silence greeted his entrance; he was a tall, broad-backed man with heavy jaws and a thin mouth like a blade. When he had called the roll, he made a boy chosen at random read the first lesson: "*Bonjour Madame, bonjour Mademoiselle, bonjour Monsieur.*" The pupil read the words as they were spelt, and Mr. Drăgan thrashed him. He bullied them all the hour, so that, when the bell rang, they were wet with perspiration. Andrei hurried home without waiting for Dan. He wanted to tell his mother everything and talk things over with her and ask her if she couldn't get a private French teacher to give them lessons to save them from becoming a laughing-stock. But just when he was about to rush into the house, he heard Suzana crying and his mother's weak, compassionate voice:

"My dear girl... my dear girl... How could you have done such a thing? In my house too... Dear me! Suzana, Suzana, we looked upon you as a niece of ours, and..."

"Oh, forgive me, Madam..."

"You know the kind of man your master is... He won't hear of it... I have never seen him so angry before."

Andrei leaned close against the door, sick at heart. From what was being said inside he understood at last what had happened. In the morning his mother had gone to see a physician. On returning unexpectedly from his office to get some papers he had forgotten at home, his father had discovered Suzana in their bed, in the bedroom, with an officer. He had thrown him out, but very civilly, as he was a Rumanian officer, after all. He had told Suzana that he did not want to set eyes on her when he re-

turned, or he would give her a dressing she would remember her whole life long.

"He promised to marry me, Madam. Tony's honourable, Madam, and he's handsome..."

"God grant it," said Ana. "Here's a month's wages, my dear. I'm very sorry."

Andrei ran into the yard and threw himself on the bench near the cellar.

What had happened seemed to him disgraceful and vile. He had lately sat with Suzana talking for hours. She had told him the story of her life. Her mother, whom she had never known, had left her on the steps of the Dominican orphanage, where she had grown up between grey walls and silent girls clad in checked pinafores, moving noiselessly about. At fourteen she had been seduced by the steward, a fat bald priest who had then given her one hundred lei to buy herself black silk stockings and garters. Suzana's one dream was to meet a rich, handsome young man who would fall in love and run away with her, until his family, fascinated by her beauty, would finally consent to welcome her with open arms. Although to Andrei all this seemed laughable, he had not the heart to contradict her: the girl's eyes glittered with tears and her ruddy face looked more beautiful. What hurt him now was that she had deceived him, not told him anything. He would have helped her, would have saved up and given her the money to buy herself frocks. And there was something even worse than that, but he didn't quite realize what it was that exactly hurt him. Well, it didn't matter that she had behaved so badly with him, he would hide and not say goodbye to her. Just then his mother came out and said:

"Come to dinner, Andrei, and say good-bye to Suzana. She's leaving us."

"Why?" he asked nearly chocking.

"She's been called away by... an uncle of hers. A brother of her mother's."

When he saw Suzana's tear-stained face, all anger melted away. He shook hands with her:

"I wish you... to be happy," he said, trying hard to steady his voice.

Before he could make a movement, the girl kissed him on the forehead and ran away, the high heels of her old shoes clattering loudly.

Red in the face and embarrassed, Andrei did not know what to do.

"Go and wash your hands," his mother had said, "and your forehead too, Andrei."

After that day no one mentioned Suzana again, as though she were dead. They did not take any other servant. Father's salary was too small and life was getting more expensive every day.

Andrei's first two years at high-school passed smoothly: lessons, sports, homework done conscientiously, lots of reading. Andrei got through the period of puberty easily: his voice breaking funnily, his hands and feet which had grown too big did not trouble him for long. He became a little more silent, somewhat suspicious, and began looking at people with other eyes. He often lost his temper and had fits of fury. His father thrashed him for the first time in his life on the day when Andrei cried: "Leave me alone! Don't you see you're bothering me?"

He felt he wasn't understood and planned to run away from home, but soon realized all these thoughts were just nonsense. He had no moderation in all he did. If a book interested him, he had no peace until he finished it; only then, with a racking headache, would he look around in astonishment as if coming out of a sleep. When playing football, he ran about wildly for hours on end, to return home exhausted, hardly able to stand. He ate so much of the dishes he relished that he was sick after that.

His mother often fretted because of him.

"Goodness gracious, Andrei, won't you ever know what moderation is? What'll you do when you grow up?"

One evening Andrei and Dan were at home, all by themselves. They heard a loud knocking at the window. When they opened the door, a tall, dishevelled fellow burst into the room.

"Where's your father?"

"He isn't in."

"Don't you remember me, my boy? I'm Constantinescu... Uncle Mihăiță... I'll wait for him."

He sat down on the sofa and buried his head in his hands. Feeling uncomfortable, Andrei and Dan collected their copy-books. The silence was lasting too long. Andrei could not manage to remember who the gentleman was.

"Are you at high-school?"

"Yes."

"And what do they teach you there?"

'What a silly question.' said Andrei to himself.

"Do they teach you that life has become unbearable in this country because of all these foreigners? Do they? And that a time for blood and revenge will come? We're looking forward to it, serenely, as the song says, with foreheads as calm as a Carpathian lake. Listen, lads, do you know this song? Take a sheet of paper and I'll dictate it to you."

When Andrei's parents returned, Constantinescu said to them sharply:

"I'm staying here for the night. The cops are after me!"

They made a bed for him on the couch. Octavian did not close an eye the whole night. Andrei heard him walk about uneasily. 'Should the police find him here, it would be the last straw,' thought Octavian. In the morning, when Andrei awoke, Constantinescu had gone. For a few days running his father was sullen and worried. Then they heard over the radio about the murder of Armand Călinescu, the Prime Minister. Constantinescu was one of the six men who had shot him. He was executed the same day, and his body left lying in a square in Bucharest. At school a few senior boys were expelled for having organized a legionary "nest." The Secret Police arrested them as they were leaving school, and shoved them into a car around which all the terrified schoolboys had congregated.

In the autumn of 1940 the greater part of Transylvania was ceded to Hungary. The news came like a thunderbolt although there had been rumours about it for several weeks. The story ran that the Rumanian delegates hadn't even been offered a seat. No one could believe it. People gathered in the streets, silent, petrified. It was said Maniu would come and make a speech. When soldiers marched

past people shouted to them: "To Budapest! Let's set the Rumanian peasant's moccasin in the Hungarian noblemen's Parliament once more!"

When his father heard the news, he burst into tears:

"It can't be true! We'll all rise, young and old... But... it can't be true, it can't!"

The next day they heard the King had abdicated and the legionaries had come into power. During the night shots were heard and in the morning detachments of legionaries were parading in the streets. Rumania had joined the "Axis." Buzgan, a shop-assistant who lived in their court, had become head of the district legionary police. He called everybody by their Christian name and at night he and his wife got drunk and roared at the top of their voices, making the whole courtyard ring with:

Hailing from Moldavia's land,
Here we are, the Legions of death!

Then they went out in the street firing pistol shots. Very soon the wife, now a legionary too, found a job for herself. She took up her station in front of Dr. Mannstein's consulting room and accosted all the patients who came out with: "Sold to the Jews, that's what you are!" She went on doing this until the doctor asked her in and offered her a monthly allowance, just to leave him alone.

At school, the "martyrs" who had been arrested, returned. They were accompanied by "Camarads" and gave a sound licking to the schoolmasters who had ever plucked them.

Trains full of refugees were arriving every day from the ceded territory.

There was a shortage of dwellings in town, rents went up tremendously, the furniture and belongings of the poor refugees lay in the station under a pouring rain. Octavian Sabin was transferred to another job, to make room for a graduate from the Cluj University.

Andrei read the newspapers feverishly. After the collapse of Poland, he was sure that in France the Germans would come to grief, as they did in the last war. He was still up to the neck in war literature; the Marne, Verdun, the Morthomme mound aroused powerful echoes in his

heart. In front of the gallant *poilus*, the zouaves and the Senegalese sharp-shooters, the Teutons would have to give in. But France fell.

The landing in England was announced with loud outcries. German and Italian magazines began to appear at the newspaper stalls: "Signal," "Tempo," "Adler," "Wehrmacht." Sturdy young men and boys were flying *gegen England*, gaining victories in the Marmarica, sinking the British fleet. At home, his father kept cursing the Germans, but half-heartedly.

"They're strong, damn them!"

Unlike the past years, very many things were happening now. Through the town passed endless trains of Serbian prisoners, of German armoured columns. It was whispered that there were divergencies between the legionaries and Antonescu. But as a matter of fact nobody knew anything.

In Andrei a change had taken place which the masters soon noticed. So far, he had been a diligent pupil, had made a name for himself in school. When he was called up, the schoolmaster put on an apologetic air, as if saying: 'I'm sorry, it is only a matter of form.' He had isolated himself instinctively from the "scum" of the form, who had taken to smoking in the privies, going to brothels and gambling. He had no friends. With Dan he had grown up, and he had the impression that his cousin felt the same as he did, on all occasions. Words, therefore, were superfluous. Andrei passed for a decent grinder, unlike other rotters who were jealously hiding their examination papers. He would let anybody crib from his, and would prompt with discretion any fellow in distress, who was called to the blackboard. He worked hard in the branches he was keen on, and knew more then was written in the books. Without realizing how, he had during his History class talked for nearly the whole hour about the Bulgaro-Rumanian Empire, and then suddenly felt ill at ease seeing the admiring smiles with which his school-fellows were looking at him. During the scripture-class that followed he made a witty reply, and Father Crăioc just gaped at him. His sally was so unexpected that a whole minute had to elapse before the class guffawed. At the math extempore paper he cribbed shamelessly, although he happened to know

how to work out the problem, and after dinner he went with a whole group to a forbidden film, "The Mayoress' Bath," where a naked woman was seen for a second. They all got caught by Stan, the sociology teacher, who acted as the school police-officer. Dumbfounded to find Andrei in the gang of the "riff-raff," Stan did not report them to the Head. But two months later Andrei's behaviour could no longer be tolerated. Encouraged by his impudence, the "scum" played some terrific tricks among which the most famous one was the pouring of a bottle of ink on the chair of Mr. Erwin Tietz, the German teacher, who, feeling something damp on his seat, kept feeling the place with his fingers the whole time, and then wiping them on his forehead. This rebellious attitude gave Andrei enormous pleasure. His position in school protected him against any persecution. He began to play poker in a company in which "Muggsy" Văgălău and Teddie Varga were the bosses, and drained them of their money, to their great admiration. Next day, in class, they discussed the extraordinary "encounters" which had taken place. All of which was faithfully reported to Father Ioachim Potra by Traian Măriеș. After the legionary rebellion, when the schoolboys had been kept locked up in their classroom nearly a whole day, while outside machine-guns were rattling, the Head, Dr. Viniciu Lucaci, decided to resort to firmer discipline. He called Andrei into the teachers' common-room and put it to him that, if he did not mend his ways, he would have to bear the consequences. Andrei answered suavely:

"I have nothing to reproach myself, sir."

"Get out, you rascal!"

But Lucaci was smiling.

The "Mihail Goldiș" literary club was re-opened and Andrei did not miss a sitting. When some poetry was being discussed, he would speak, trying to impress everybody by his knowledge. He had a way which never failed: he invented quotations from Titu Maiorescu, from Ibrăileanu or Lovinescu, and in front of these summits of Rumanian criticism the others were so taken aback that they kept mum.

After several interventions of this kind, Mr. Burtea, one of the masters, asked Andrei to write a paper on a

poem by Suciu Septimiu, the school bard. It was something pastoral with ox-waggons, orchards, oxen and national costumes. Andrei ridiculed it cruelly, analysed it image for image, proving that it was a vulgar plagiarism after Vasile Alecsandri. While he spoke, he listened with pleasure to the others laughing, and when he finished, he felt intoxicated with pride. The deeply hurt author tried to retort sternly to this insolent youngster: "As a matter of fact," he said, "Vlahuță himself drew his inspiration from Eminescu."

"It is a long road from inspiration to plagiarism," answered Andrei impudently and advised him to use those "creations" in future in his love letters, and not read them to people who, after all, knew one or two things. At the same sitting, a strange poem signed "Ignotus" was read: a restless spring, a curious geometrical landscape, an endless desert; and only an inner fever animated the whole, a craving, a hopeless and vain chase.

The poem, unusual in the Club's atmosphere inspired mainly by the "Semănătorul" review, raised a storm of protest. Nothing but words! Ravings! Decadent! Murărașu's history of literature was quoted to prove that only Jewish poets wrote such things. Amidst unanimous indignation, Andrei rose to defend the poem.

He said he wasn't surprised at the reaction of the others, for whom only the gentle ox and the curly sheep might be poetic elements. He advised them to read real literature so as to form their taste and be able to understand what genuine poetry meant. As a conclusion he quoted a recently discovered Latin verse which seemed to him highly significant:

O fortunati mercatores, gravis annis ait miles. *

To conclude, Professor Burtea, unwilling to appear a "happy merchant," said that the poem was most interesting, "it had ideas." When Andrei went out through the school-gate, proud of his victory, Lucian Varga walked up to him. He was one year older, the acknowledged first-prize of the school, a boy who kept aloof, to whom a full ten minutes of the year's closing address was always devoted.

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* Oh, happy merchants, said the age-laden warrior

"Shall we go part of the way together?" And when they had walked away from the massive building, he said, blushing: "You know, I wrote that poem."

"It is very beautiful."

They strolled along for a long time, without noticing where they went. They had discovered each other and would have liked to know everything about one another from the beginning. That was why they talked a lot, at random, skipping from one subject to the other; Lucian said that his brother Teddie had spoken of him, that he had long wanted to make his acquiantance. After a while, looking at his watch, Lucian started.

"My Goodness! It's past midnight. I know my people will be anxious. I never was as late as that. Say, won't you come to my place tomorrow afternoon?" That night Andrei was long in going to sleep. 'At last I have a friend,' he thought with a new feeling of happiness.

No day passed without their seeing each other. At school they looked for one another in the long breaks, and often didn't hear the bell ring. At five o'clock sharp Andrei would ring at Lucian's front door. They closeted themselves up in the latter's room and discussed about books, about people. Lucian was much more learned than Andrei; his knowledge was more thorough. That was perhaps what prompted Andrei to put forth all kind of personal opinions: he contested the value of all that was orthodox, he made a display of atheism. Lucian, crammed with French and English culture, was anti-German. Andrei started to praise the Germans. Moreover, he was attracted by the vitality and the "sporting" quality of the war. The papers were at the time full of Rommel's first victories in Africa; parallels were drawn between them and Napoleon's campaign in Egypt. The aims were identical: the crushing of the British Empire in India. Lucian never contradicted him. He listened attentively, stimulating him by some question, so that Andrei never knew whether Lucian agreed with him or not. In fact, Andrei admired Lucian, and that was just why his conventionalism annoyed him as if it were some personal defect.

Their friendship was very unequal: after disturbing confessions, like the one when Lucian had avowed that he had never approached a girl, there followed spells of unjustified gloominess. Neither of them realized that this was the natural reaction against their sincerity which, in turns, disarmed them in front of one another.

They would sometimes for days on end not tell each other anything, avoiding each other's company, only to write thereupon long letters, confessions in which they exaggerated their faults. When they met again, they felt embarrassed but happy.

In June 1941, when the war broke out, it was a great day in the Varga house.

Lucian's father was delighted.

"At last, Hitler is done for," he said. "They may well boast that they'll finish with Russia in two or three weeks. That's not so easy. Others have tried it before. He! he!... do you know that joke? It seems that when Hitler visited Paris he went to the Dôme des Invalides, to talk to Napoleon. He told him: 'I've beaten Poland, Yugoslavia, Greece, France, and England is on her last legs. I'm greater than you...' From the grave came a voice: 'Have you defeated the Russians?' 'No,' answered the Führer. 'Then come and lie down by me,' Napoleon's voice sounded... Well, what do you think of that?"

Three days after the beginning of the war Octavian Sabin came home slightly tipsy, but not gay as he usually was on such occasions. They couldn't get a word out of him: it was only before going to bed that he let out:

"Mother, I'm afraid I've made a terrible blunder."

Next day he came from his office as white as a sheet. He had been appointed station-master in a Bessarabian hamlet called Pîrlita,* a name which tells its own tale. In forty-eight hours he had to be at his new post. It was a punishment because, while having a drink with his colleagues, he had said that Rumania had no business going to war against Russia. "They'd better thrash the Germans and Hungarians for having robbed us of our sacred Transilvania."

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* *Pîrlit* — in Rumanian: wretched (T.N.)

A week later Dan's father too left for the front, as reserve second-lieutenant in an infantry regiment. Uncle Palli, a sergeant in the mountain light infantry, had already written the first letter from "somewhere at the front." They began to be hard up. Octavian was only sending home a quarter of his salary. Had it not been for Dan's mother who had all the care both of the headmastership of the school and of her household, Andrei would not have been able to go to high-school. Under those circumstances the obstinate friendship Lucian was showing him ought to have been a help, but, in point of fact, was not. Involuntarily Andrei felt a discontent rising in him, which he was ashamed of; the Varga family lived very well, Lucian had as many books as he wanted, and Teddie had no end of suits. Had Lucian understood what was going on in his mind, Andrei would have died with shame.

When Mr. Varga went to Bucharest, Lucian would tell Andrei that he could ask him to bring back any book he desired: "Father hasn't got much luggage." He asked him to the theatre when some company came from Bucharest. Andrei said disparagingly that he didn't care a straw either for books or for the theatre. He would have liked to do something out of the common, to volunteer for the front and return with a decoration and in a dilapidated uniform; otherwise he felt he would sink past recovery into an unfathomable morass.

He began to lead a wild life: he frequented pubs along with the school-rotters who were immensely bucked up by his company. Naturally, all those things were heard of at school. One day Father Potra called him into the common-room. With exaggerated politeness he motioned him to an arm-chair.

"My dear boy, I haven't had an opportunity to know you before. I've heard quite a lot about you, some good reports, but mostly unfavourable ones. But this concerns your confessor. (Andrei was a Greek-Orthodox). But I want to ask you something: Do you really care for Lucian?"

"Yes."

"Then why do you want to make him unhappy? You are a very clever boy, but you are bad and this is why your cleverness is dangerous."

"May I answer you openly?"

"Do, by all means. As one man to another. I should be pleased if we got to know each other better."

"Well then, sir... What I do is none of your business. Good day."

Some time after this, the history master Suslănescu looked up Andrei. He told him that he admired him very much, had admired him ever since the sitting of the literary club when he had stood up for Ignotus's poem, defending it against the Philistines; and that this was exactly why he advised him to be more cautious: Father Potra spoke ill of him at the teachers' council, while Stan the sociologist characterized him as a "wild skunk" whose connections ought to be watched.

"Let them all go hang!"

"You're an *enfant terrible*. O, youthful enthusiasm!..."

That year in the country Andrei didn't enjoy himself as he used to. Aunt Emilia would send them, him and Dan, to superintend the threshing of the wheat and the gathering of the maize, so that the peasants, with whom they were associated in the working of the land, should not, by any chance, steal any of the harvest. Andrei let them alone; he lay for hours under a bush, the farthest away possible, contemplating the sky. In the village the first announcements had arrived: "Fallen gallantly on the Eastern front."

Two months after the beginning of school Uncle Palli came home on leave. He was as thin as a stick and covered with lice. Andrei was looking forward to hearing about gallant feats, but the next day when he and Dan and their uncle went for a walk along the bank of the Mureş, the latter told them the Russians would win the war. They fought with extraordinary courage. The Germans would still keep advancing for some time, but that soon...

Greatly disturbed, Andrei talked to him about the German technique, but his uncle laughed at him.

"What are we doing in Russia? It's just Antonescu's madness... The soldiers have no idea what they are fighting for. The only question you can hear is: 'What the devil are we doing here?' We are behaving savagely in Russia and you'll see we'll have to pay dearly for it..."

To cheer them up, he told them heaps of stories: how they used to fool the German allies, an amusing incident with a piglet walking along composed and dignified during an air-raid...

Three months after Palli's departure Dan's father also came home on leave. He too kept saying: "The Russians'll win the war."

This was at the time the Germans were nearing Stalingrad.

At school, a visit to the war hospital was announced. At Lucian's house great preparations were in course: trayfuls of cakes, roast chickens, bottles of wine. At the hospital a kind of celebration took place, heroic poems were recited and jokes about gipsies and Jews were told.

The whole time Andrei felt very ill at ease. He had the feeling that the kindness and interest shown the wounded was a ghastly comedy, and the contrast between the schoolboys' health and the state of those cripples was dreadful.

At home his mother drudged the whole day long. She had grown thinner and in the evening she was completely worn out with fatigue. Now and again she would relate to Andrei things that happened when he was a small boy, entreating him to study hard and become a great doctor or an engineer. He kept silent. The whole time he was feeling as if he had received a blow from somewhere, which had smashed him to smithereens, and that he was no longer capable of gathering himself together. Even the talks with Lucian and the revels with Teddie and Văgălău began to bore him.

Then came the Lupaşcu row. Lupaşcu had come to high school in 1941. Nobody knew how they discovered that he was a Jew and had false papers. Stan the sociologist shouted at the top of his voice, standing on the tips of his toes to look more imposing. Lupaşcu, by his real name Wiesel, listened to him stunned and quite helpless. At one moment he muttered:

"I wanted to learn..."

"At the synagogue! Not here! You pollute this pure Rumanian air. You deserve to be sent to a concentration camp for this forgery."

Then something monstrous happened. The boys began to make fun of Wiesel.

"Where are your ear-locks, sye?"

"Itzick, my boy, Shloim, my boy, how is pizziness, hey?"

Somebody snatched away his bag and flung it at his head. Wiesel knelt down quickly and with trembling hands began to pick up his books and copybooks. Then Horciony, the son of the owner of the gold mines in the Western Mountains, stuck a pin into his backside, among the peals of laughter of the others.

All the lesson Andrei was boiling. He looked at the pale nape of Horciony's neck and could hardly refrain from throwing his bag or his drawing-board at his head. He looked at Wiesel's empty seat. He was ashamed that he hadn't stood up for him, that since they had been schoolmates, they'd hardly exchanged ten words. During the break he picked a quarrel with Horciony and, when the other answered him defiantly, he hit him with his fist full in the face, broke his spectacles and his nose and covered him with blood. Horciony went away crying and reported him at the masters' common-room. He came back and said to Andrei trembling with rage:

"You're expected at the common-room... sir!"

The form master, the natural-science teacher Răducanu, met him at the entrance with a shout:

"Come in, you fiend! What's come over you?"

Then he closed the door quickly. When he turned round to Andrei, his whole face was beaming. He held out his hand:

"Thank you for licking him, Andrei, I couldn't do it myself. It's dreadful when people forget they are human beings. Sit down, please. D'you smoke? Come on, don't pretend you don't. I know a thing or two myself."

Andrei lit a cigarette, but didn't dare put it in his mouth. Răducanu was pacing the room and rubbing his hands.

"You know, I ought not tell you this, but... Take it as you like. I was afraid your generation would be lost. And little wonder. So many beastly things are being rammed down your throat. Such lack of humanity. Poor Wiesel!" He stopped and, coming near Andrei, put both hands on his shoulders: "Stay always as you are now, my boy. Now go... I thank you."

Astounded, Andrei who was expecting to be expelled described to Lucian the scene that had taken place. Lucian was not over-surprised:

"Răducanu? French education... It is said he was a freemason or socialist. He'll catch it some day! Come and see what Uncle Crișan has sent us from Transnistria.* A lovely samovar. We'll brew our tea and read some Turgenev.

The samovar was indeed lovely, but Lucian's admiration enraged Andrei.

"When the Russians win the war we'll pay for it, you may be sure."

Lucian stared at him.

"What d'you mean: win the war? Andrei, what are you talking about?"

Every time he came to Lucian's house he found Suslănescu there.The master apologized for disturbing them, but "he liked the company of refined and well-read boys very much!" He told them heaps of things: about an aristocratic school *pour demoiselles*, where only French was spoken (those who forgot the rule and spoke one single Rumanian word were obliged to wear an ignominous copper medal on their chest); or about the men he had been friends with at the University, refined, elegant fellows, some of them homosexual. He was in raptures about the XVIIIth century, the only one in which he would have liked to live. He would repeat famous retorts. Richelieu's (or somebody else's) words on his death bed had delighted him: *Je demande pardon a Votre Majesté d'être obligé de mourir devant Elle.*

To Lucian, Andrei boasted about his conquests; the truth was he had never lain with a woman. One day, while the two were talking, Teddie burst into the room.

"Well, you scholars, who's coming to Willy's?" (Willy was the name of the boss of the smartest brothel in town.) "I don't mean Lucian. He's a saint. What about you, Andrei? It's on me!"

"Alright," said Andrei rising.

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* A Russian territory on the eastern side of the Dniester, that was temporarily occupied by the Rumanians during the Second World War

Lucian looked at him with horror but also with secret admiration.

On the way there Andrei tortured his mind to find an excuse for not going, but he couldn't hit on anything.

"I advise you to go to Suzy. She is a darling, I tell you. Look, here it is. I'll let you go in first. I'm going to the bar."

Andrei knocked at the green door, then went in. The little room was plastered with photos and drawings. All of them represented no other but their former maid Suzana. They recognized each other immediately and remained speechless. Suzana had grown beautiful. She had large, soft eyes, and the fringe on her forehead gave her the air of a midinette. The tea-gown, opened in front, showed a full, well-shaped leg. She was so pale that the make-up put red blotches on her face.

"Suzana," stammered Andrei, "that's what you've come to? For heaven's sake! But how can you stand this life? You're young... you might..."

The next moment her face went crimson. She screamed at the top of her voice:

"Now just look at that! Get out, you brat! Fancy you lecturing me! The cheek!"

Andrei turned round slowly and put his hand on the doorhandle, but the next moment Suzana was near him. She hung on to his arm.

"Andrei, don't go... Stay, Andrei... Don't go to other women. Stay here..."

Fearing she might faint, Andrei sat down on the edge of the bed.

"All the same, you'd better go," she said gently, after a while.

Andrei rose mechanically.

"Andrei... I want to ask you something... Come tomorrow morning very early. We have no customers before lunch." The word was dreadful and she felt it. "Promise. Will you come?"

"I will!"

In the passage, dazed, he knocked against the math teacher Burghelea, a married man with two children. For a moment they stared at each other, equally self-conscious both of them; then Burghelea whispered to him confidentially:

"I haven't seen you, you haven't seen me, or out you fly from school, you filthy scoundrel!"

The whole night Andrei was unable to sleep; he kept tossing about in bed. The next day he ran to the lantern-street. The door-keeper of the establishment looked long at his cap and number and shook his head.

Suzana was waiting for him; she had no make-up on, and wore a plain blue dress. They sat down side by side, their hands on their kness, like schoolchildren. They were both silent. Andrei felt how her fingers crept slowly along his arm in a shy caress. Then he whispered, looking into her eyes:

"You know... I have never been with a woman, never."

When he got home he locked himself up in the bathroom and gazed at himself for a long time in the looking-glass, a prey to intricate feelings: disappointment, relief, shame and pride.

Every afternoon he was at Suzana's. As of old, he told her the plots of the books he had read, but more often still he invented romantic stories which made her cry. One day, coming away from Suzy, he heard behind him the words of a girl:

"That's Suzy's boy. Quite a nice kid . . ."

Lucian shunned him for a time, deeply pained, but one day he couldn't help saying to him, while avoiding his glance:

"Andrei, Teddie 's told me you were living with a prostitute. It's horrible."

"Why?" he said shrugging his shoulders. "She's a harlot, and we're schoolboys . . . It's the same thing."

Some time after that a theatrical company came from Bucharest. Andrei managed to get hold of some money, after a heavy game of poker, and the next day he proposed to Suzana to go with him to the theatre. She could hardly believe it. She looked at him stunned, then asked him if he wasn't making fun of her.

"No, no. I really want you to come. Here are the tickets." (As a matter of fact he was rather scared when she accepted.)

Suzana clapped her hands and told him what she was going to wear.

"I won't disgrace you. I have a lot of clothes."

"And I'll look like a tramp."

"Andrei!" She jumped up, but stopped immediately, frightened, and whispered: "If you wanted..." She saw him frown and said quickly: "Nothing... nothing... forgive me." During the whole performance. Andrei looked around him, terrified. He didn't hear one single word of the play. On their way home she reproduced whole scenes, she was in raptures. She begged him to come and sleep at her place. She had a room in town. Then she laughed:

"What nonsense I'm talking! As if I didn't know what Madam is like... She would die if you didn't come home one night."

Next day Father Potra said to Andrei:

"I saw you at the theatre with a young lady."

"She's my cousin."

"Aha, I see. I was surprised that the harlot I've heard you were living with should look like that. Andrei, Andrei..."

Towards the beginning of 1943 Andrei's father returned home. Uncle Gavril had bribed somebody in Bucharest. Octavian, with tears in his eyes, spoke of what sacred brotherly love can do. He hadn't changed, he'd just grown thinner and kept cursing the Germans and the insane marshal.

At school, hours of pre-military training had been introduced in the upper forms. Under Stan's leadership the boys ran howling from one end to the other of the playground, brandishing wooden guns painted red, to the envious glances of the lower-form boys who were following them speechless with admiration.

One spring afternoon of the same year Andrei was taking a walk with Teddie and some other boys along the banks of the Mureş. The swollen river was flowing muddily, covered with foam and bits of wood, carrying along drowned hens and dogs.

"I'll stand a bottle of champagne to the chap who'll swim out to midstream and back again," Teddie said.

In a twinkling Andrei stripped and jumped into the ice-cold water. When he returned, half frozen, his arms stiff, people had gathered around him as at the circus. He dressed shivering, ashamed, and took his leave from the others. Then somebody touched his shoulder. It was a tall slender girl with blue eyes, wearing a black pinafore with a small white collar.

"Why do you do silly things like that, Mr. Sabin?"

"I don't..." he stammered.

The girl realized he didn't remember her and grew red all over.

"We met this winter ar the skating-rink. Don't you remember? My name's Sonia Bucşan."

"Sonia!" shouted Teddie who had seen her. "What do you say of Tarzan?"

Stuttering, Andrei took his leave and left hurriedly, walking self-conciously, as he did every time he knew somebody was looking at him. The whole day he was furious that he had behaved like a lout. Indeed, Teddie had introduced them at the skating-rink, but at the time he thought himself in love with Gipsy Belega with whom he skated all the time, holding her tightly by the waist.

Next day Andrei left school earlier, alleging a visit to the dentist's, and walked up and down in front of the Carmen Sylva Girls' High School, waiting for the girls to come out. He wanted to accompany Sonia for a while, to dispel the bad impression his bravado and his rudeness must have made upon her. He was just turning round for the second time, when he saw her in a merry group of girls. She was laughing aloud, shaking her head. Andrei greeted her formally taking his cap off and bowing.

"Won't you come with us? You could try to get drowned again," she called to him, waving her hand. "We're going for a stroll along the bank."

"With pleasure," Andrei hastened to accept.

He knew nearly all the girls in the group; all the same it seemed difficult to find a topic at a moment's notice. The girls were talking about their school-mistresses, about difficult lessons, and — for a moment — Andrei thought of leaving them there and going home. He didn't do so. He was looking stealthily at Sonia's slightly sun-

burnt face, at her delicate temples and rebellious curls. Suddenly he felt like yelling, like throwing his bag down, like doing something mad. One by one the group scattered; there remained only the two of them and a girl who lived in the same street as Sonia. When they left her at her front-door, Andrei slowed down. At last he said:

"You must have a very good opinion of me after what happened yesterday."

"No," she answered and looked at him in surprise.

When their eyes met, Andrei saw her eyes, blue with golden flecks like small sunny spots.

"No," she went on, "sometimes you boys feel the urge to leave the trodden path, especially at a certain age."

Bewildered by Sonia's words, Andrei sought for something witty and cutting to retort, but didn't hit on anything. He bowed, smiling sarcastically. They walked on in silence for some time.

"Here's where I live," Sonia said, stopping in front of a high wrought-iron gate, through the railings of which an untidy garden, full of weeds, shrubs and dwarf trees could be seen. "Good-bye, Andrei."

She shook hands and he felt his body brimming over with a queer warmth. He would have liked to tell her something simple and sincere, but only stammered:

"Tell me... may I see you again?"

"Yes," said Sonia, and ran in.

He walked home, so slowly that he was late for lunch, and his father delivered him a short lecture, stopped only by Andrei's absent looks and angelic smile. The old man coughed several times and began to sip his soup noisily.

After lunch Andrei lay down, quite against his habit, and pulled the blinds down. His mother asked him anxiously if he wasn't feeling ill, but Sabin said solemnly:

"Leave the boy alone, my dear."

He felt at peace as he had never felt before. Several times he found himself smiling; he couldn't stop at home any longer and went to Lucian's. Very discreetly — so he thought — he led the talk on to Sonia. Teddie told him she was the daughter of a crippled engineer, Bucșan, who had fallen from a scaffolding twelve years ago and had fractured his spine.

"Up to this year she was only a brat not fit to be looked at. And all of a sudden, bless her, she has grown ever so beautiful!" He winked. "You like her, you rascal, what? You want to snatch this one away from us too?"

Lucian turned his head away in disgust.

Every day Andrei tried to meet her, but he didn't see her coming out of school, and didn't dare ask her schoolmates what was the matter with her.

A week passed.

One of Octavian's colleagues at the State Railways was arrested; he had complained that life was expensive because the Germans were carting everything out of the country. He was exposed to view, in chains, in front of the Military Club. Andrei's mother entreated her husband to think of the child's future, to control himself and not let his tongue wag.

"Don't you worry, mother, I don't go in for politics. I am a Rumanian."

At school the same suspicious atmosphere. Suslănescu complained to Andrei. Everybody was suspected of not being a "good Rumanian."

"What they call a good Rumanian today means to keep your mouth shut and swallow any kind of filth; to give up thinking." And he added: "Luckily Stan, the Secret Police agent, is easily won over; you need but tickle his stupid self-conceit a little."

In a three men talk Lucian put forth the idea that France was a strictly fixed notion in the conscience of humanity —the homeland of spirituality.

"What about Rumania?" asked Andrei.

"You know," said Lucian, "what Poincaré said: *Nous sommes ici aux bords de l'Orient, où tout est pris à la légére.*"

Suslănescu began to relate small facts which justified this speculation.

Andrei recollected Suslănescu's pathetic speeches on the "History of the Nation," Lucian's recent essay in which he extolled the poetry of Vlahuţă, only to tell him, on leaving the sitting of the literary club: "The whole of the good old bard's poetry isn't worth one single line of Baudelaire's." Andrei had tried to prove to him the contrary, and Lucian seemed amazed:

"Well, those were your theories. You stuffed my head a year ago..." And after a moment's hesitation he added: "Do you know, I believe I have begun to understand you."

He didn't say any more, but Andrei felt that the opinion Lucian had formed about him was not at all flattering. Lucian immediately felt that he had hurt him and took his arm.

"Forgive me... You are also paradoxical. But together we form a right angle. Our friendship is the only beautiful thing in this world. Come on, Andrei, don't be angry."

Andrei forced himself to smile. As a matter of fact, at that moment he would have liked to be able to say to him: "Go to hell!"

Lucian was happy after his own fashion. He took an interest in everything he did, he was able to discuss for hours the schoolmasters' characters, the trivial happenings of school life, and after a while this drove Andrei mad. He felt old and fed up with everything. He would have liked to do something out of the common, but didn't know exactly what. Everything around him seemed to be of devastating flatness: the gossip, the lessons, his schoolfellows.

He was pining to see Sonia again and one afternoon he plucked up courage and went to her home. All the way he kept saying to himself that he was doing a foolish thing and that she would think him ridiculous. Several times he wanted to turn back. He crossed the yard and, after mounting several rickety steps, rang at a door with painting washed away by the rains. A tall woman who was still young, despite her completely white hair that looked like a powdered wig, answered his ring.

"I should like to see Miss Bucşan, please," Andrei said to her. "Is she in?"

"Yes," she answered, "come in, please."

In a dark passage smelling of quinces Andrei heard the gay sound of a piano.

"Sonia! A friend has come to see you!"

When she saw Andrei she looked surprised, but ran towards him with her hand outstretched.

"Mother, this is Andrei Sabin. I have been telling you about him."

"I was afraid... you know... I wanted to see you!" he said angry with himself for this stupid and unusual shyness.

"Please come in... Sit down... In ten minutes I'll have finished my lesson. Mother is adamant in this respect. Do you like music?"

"Yes. It's a good excuse for meditation."

"Now you've said something stupid. Do you know that?"

"I know," he said meekly.

He sat down in an arm-chair. He could see her delicate profile, her long, upturned eyelashes. Sonia was chasing her fingers along the keys. 'I don't know anything about her,' thought Andrei. 'And I believe...' he halted, frightened 'I believe I've fallen in love,' he went on and this didn't surprise him. It was as if he had been bearing it in his mind for a long time, and it only needed to be stated. He didn't notice when she got up from the piano and came towards him.

"Come on, what are you dreaming of? Have my exercises disturbed you as much as all that?"

"No," he answered brusquely, like a schoolboy.

They were silent for some time.

"Have you got any brothers?" asked Andrei.

He was thinking: 'What heights of stupidity a fellow can reach on certain occasions!' He was surprised to see her eyes had filled with tears.

"I had one... Puiu... He was killed at the front in 1941."

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "It was a stupid question. But I don't know anything about you."

"Mother has travelled to the place where the battle was fought. She wanted to bring him back here. But there were only crosses... many of them... A Rumanian soldier, a Rumanian officer..."

A little later they went out for a walk. They were silent. Andrei would have liked to clasp her shoulder lightly, to encourage her somehow.

"You said you knew so little about me," she said after a time. "You see, with me it's the contrary. Gypsy has

been telling me a lot about you. And the girls... I've heard you were clever, but very... how shall I put it... dissolute..."

She had said the word looking away rather embarrassed. Andrei laughed.

"It isn't true."

"And mother, you know, mother is a school-mistress at our school, and she thinks the same. Some of the masters have been talking about you."

"That means I am somebody."

That night Andrei slept little. It seemed to him the sheets were burning him and that the night passed too slowly. But the next day they couldn't meet because there had been a new row at the boys' high school. Ten boys in form III A were expelled because they had organized a sort of association — *Plăieşii* (The Mountaineers). They fought duels with those of form III B. They had written circulars, orders in code, paroles. Father Crăioc confiscated all the archive. The whole thing was given a political taint. After the Head's furious speech the prefects were summoned to the common-room where they were told that they had to report weekly to Mr. Stan all that happened and was said in the class-room. The terrified boys listened attentively. Andrei got up and said:

"My impression is that expelling is a monstrous stupidity. Moreover I refuse to play the part of informer. I think it isn't fair."

"Sit down, Sabin!" roared the Head. "Sit down! Hold your tongue!"

Suslănescu was always asking him to be more cautious. Andrei answered with a verse of Shakespeare: "This above all, to thine own self be true." He had earned the reputation of being a rebel. But if at first he had done all those things out of an adolescent's need of bravado, now he was feeling it to be the only possible outlet against the discontent which filled his whole being.

Preparations were being made for the fête of the patron. The same as every year, the Rumanian master wrote a play, this time in verse, and proposed to Andrei to act the leading part. He refused, putting forward his lack of talent. The honour of impersonating the "staunch Ru-

manian" was granted to Mărieș, who was exempted from attending the classes. The future patron walked about the whole day with uplifted eyes, reciting heroic tirades:

Dear friend of mine, sent up to Parliament,
I swear upon my conscience : I will not be an instrument.

The Head produced from a drawer the text of the address delivered every year: "Risen from very low, from a humble hut with no chimney — which meant that the smoke got out through the door—he had not forgotten!..."

The idea of spoiling the show occured to Andrei during a talk with Lucian, who agreed immediately. Andrei asked for the part of prompter, which Burtea gladly gave him.

For three days they made very secret preparations. At the fête Micky Belega recited Suciu's poem *Quiet Cloister* with roars and with pathetic tremolos, and when he got to the lines:

The monks in their cells
Lead a saintly life
And nobody knows
What weighs on their soul

he made such immodest and precise gestures that the whole house was flabbergasted. The Head hurried up on the stage to crush him with blows, but Micky had vanished into thin air. During the play Andrei from his cage whispered all kind of smutty things, putting Mărieș out of countenance to the point that he forgot his lines, perspired profusely, and the make-up ran down his cheeks that had grown pale with shame. In the finale, when the patron was breathing his last, according to tradition, Teddie Varga appeared in the part of the officer who brought him the decoration. He was wearing a civilian hat, a knapsack on his back, a coat of hermine, a gun, a sword and in his hand a rolled-up map. He asked:

"How are you, my dear patron?"

Mărieș in genuine agony was rattling off:

"I see how out of heavy mists... I see... the sun is rising."

"The chap's seriously ill," declared Teddie.

The house roared with laughter. Neither the prefect, the mayor, nor the Head could refrain from laughing.

The schoolmasters' council met the next day. Andrei was given a low mark for bad behaviour. Teddie was expelled for two days, Micky for a week, because he had thrashed the poet Suciu who had tried to make him responsible for distorting the meaning of his poem. The punishments, except that of Andrei, were suspended; it was breaking-up day.

At parting Andrei promised Lucian to write to him but didn't keep his promise. This would have needed a frame of mind he couldn't find again. Around him, life and people's fate had something overwhelming and brutal; there was so much suffering in the world that he felt that love and all that it meant — oblivion, fulfilment in a secluded world, impervious to anything else — would have been an immoral, incongruous thing. When the announcement of uncle Palli's heroic death had arrived, a heavy stillness fell on aunt Emilia's house. Every evening Andrei went out with Dan as far as the end of the village and would look at the stars, that quiet and boundless host of remote lights, and rebel against the feeling of diffidence and insecurity that overcame him.

At the beginning of the autumn term his father lost his job. He came home singing at the top of his voice: "Rise Rumanians from your deadly sleep!" * At his mother's entreaty, Andrei applied for a scholarship. At the examination, the president of the commission, Professor Burtea, gave him the highest marks, saying with a sour smile:

"You see, this is my revenge."

But three days later his father got his job back. When Andrei told the Head that he was giving his scholarship up, the latter chucked him out.

In this grey atmosphere his dates with Sonia were the only thing that meant something to him. They met every day; sometimes she seemed to him aggravatingly grown-up, at other times he felt that beyond the words they were exchanging other meanings took shape. At those times he would have liked everything to stop still and

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*A heroic march (T.N.).

to be understood by her with a single glance. He was neglecting Lucian. Their talks had begun to bore him. It was always the same thing: raptures for the superb structure of French literature, vague plans for the future and, on leaving, sad little hints: "You've changed, Andrei." He was angry at the fact that Lucian was a little sarcastic and superior when he talked enthusiastically about the need for action, any action, to break loose from the net in which they were struggling, to justify themselves to their own selves. Lucian shrugged his shoulders: "What do you want to do? What can you do?"

It was winter. From the windows of Lucian's room you could see the streets on which the snow was falling lazily, lending them a clean, festive air. The radiator was spreading out a soft warmth. They were self-consciously silent. Suslănescu was there as well, and they had been discussing the war. All at once, Andrei had exclaimed angrily: "Well? Should the Russians occupy us, could it possibly be worse?" Whereupon Lucian had got up from the wide sofa and said in a kind of fury: "For you perhaps not. I believe anarchy would suit you people to a T... you precocious *blasés!*"

Suslănescu had coughed ill at ease, but one could see he was thinking the same. At six Andrei was to meet Sonia, and he didn't know how to leave. He didn't want Lucian to think he was doing it because of the words he had said to him. Still, he could not stay any longer.

"Maybe... you're right... Sorry... I'll have to go now..."

"Andrei! You don't... by any chance..."

"I have an appointment."

But Lucian's words had hurt him more than he wished to admit even to himself. He was walking along gloomily, his feet sinking into the snow up to his ankles. 'Could it be true that our ideals are only delusions, only childish dreams, as Suslănescu sometimes says?'

Sonia was waiting for him on the bank. She saw him from a long way off and began to bombard him with snowballs. 'Why am I wasting my time on her?' Andrei wondered sullenly while they were walking side by side. After all any form of intercourse between a man and a girl tends to

a single aim. Why go on lying to myself and also to her?' He turned to her and, taking her by the arm, asked her:

"Listen Sonia, what would you say if I told you that I loved you? You're in love with me too, aren't you?"

Sonia stopped short, astonished. Her eyelids fluttered several times. Andrei forced himself to laugh, but could hardly look her in the eyes. Her silence annoyed him.

"What we are doing, our walks, discussions and so on... are a tribute paid to bourgeois common sense... There's no sense in it. You love me, don't you?"

"No."

Her voice was slightly muffled and from her face all gaiety had vanished.

"What do you mean by 'no'?"

"I repeat: I don't love you, Andrei."

"Why don't you want to own up?" (He had the feeling of having made a false step, but couldn't stop. He really couldn't part with her like that.)

"Would you like me to lie? I can't and I don't want to. I care for you as a friend, that's all."

Andrei looked at her strangely.

"And don't you want to know if I love you or not?"

"I don't need to be sure. I know."

"What?"

"That you are... too young to know what that means."

"Very cleverly put, indeed!"

He would have liked to run away, to leave her there. As he was near crying with rage, he lit a cigarette with trembling fingers, inhaled several times deep into his chest, then flung it far away. He smiled bitterly.

"I have the impression that our friendship too has come to an end."

"Why, Andrei?" Sonia asked gently.

"How," he wondered, "could you still behave as before, after what I've told you?"

"But you haven't told me anything."

"Well, if you look at it that way... Come on, I'll see you home. I've got to... I've got to do my lessons for tomorrow."

"Andrei!"

"I really must do them!" he repeated with childish stubbornness.

But after parting with her, he began to run along the streets, and then went to see a picture where he hadn't the patience to stay to the end. He felt frightfully lonely. That night he told himself that he quite understood Sonia's attitude. That wasn't the right way to confess one's love. But how else? The way Teddie did who, being always in love, talked to the girl about her star-like eyes and about her body that caused him sleepless nights and took his breath away? This he couldn't do. Sonia ought to have understood, words oughtn't to have been necessary...

On the following days he didn't go to wait for her as usual, and when they met casually, they both felt embarrassed.

"Won't you come with me for a bit, Andrei?"

"I'm sorry... I am rather busy."

His attitude was stupid, it was the behaviour of a sullen child. He realized it and began to laugh.

"It isn't true. I have nothing at all to do. Come along, I'll accompany you, if you like."

"You needn't," she answered.

She turned her back on him and went off. Andrei caught up with her and wanted to take her arm, but she pushed him away. He saw her to her door, obstinately, although they didn't speak a single word.

After that, meeting at the skating rink, at sleighing, they made it up tacitly. Andrei was telling himself that, as a matter of fact, everything had ended before it had started and he got used to it.

At times only, when loneliness and bitterness tortured him, he thought how fine it would be if every man had a friend, a sweetheart, a being next to whom he might find peace of mind and confidence.

In the following months they began to see each other again, to talk about books, music, people, but it was no longer what it had been before.

In March he met Schwartz. He had been to see a war film. The whole time there were roars of laughter in the hall, as at a Stanley Laurel and Oliver Hardy comedy. In

coming out he knocked against a thin youngster with spectacles.

"How do you do?" asked the latter, and it was only then that Andrei remembered who he was. They had been schoolfellows up to 1940, when the Jews had been forbidden to attend Rumanian schools.

"How are you getting on?"

"I'm taking lessons in heroism. Will you come along with me?"

During their walk, Andrei was astonished to discover the biting sarcasm of Schwartz whom he remembered as a shy schoolboy frightened to death by his stricter masters. Schwartz asked him to come to his lodgings, and they talked till midnight in the little room full of all kinds of books thrown about pell-mell. In contrast with Lucian and even with Sonia, Schwartz was neither surprised nor indignant at Andrei's outbursts against school, the people and the world.

"You aren't telling me anything new," he said, "and not even original."

As it invariably happened when he formed a new connection, Andrei neglected the others. What he liked in Schwartz was the practical side of his character; on the other hand, his new friend often seemed to him paradoxical, especially on the day when he told him that, after all said and done, he, Andrei, was as conventional as all intellectuals were.

"What d'you mean by conventional?" Andrei cried out angrily.

"You see, not in the usual meaning, but in a social sense. It is, if you see what I mean, the intellectual's fate in modern society. And this, no doubt, comes from cowardice, a social form of cowardice, of which he himself isn't guilty. Think of it, if all intellectuals of all categories would join together to defend their interests and impose their point of view..."

This idea haunted Andrei a long time. It seemed to him imposingly simple. No doubt about it, Schwartz was right. If at high school the best pupils imposed their own views, many things would not be what they were. In a break he told this to Lucian who began to laugh:

"Phase number two: Andrei Sabin as a reformer."

But strangely enough, Schwartz said the same thing when they took this topic up again:

"Under present conditions nothing can be done. As soon as you rise alone or in a group, society casts you aside ruthlessly, as an individual dangerous to her established order. As for a real unity... maybe some time. Not now."

"But when?"

"Only when the present-day relations between people change."

"You mean after a revolution. And the revolution, when?"

"When the Germans will have lost the war. This war has torn down the masks of all the faces. Everybody's attitude towards this war counts. Words of revolt prudently quenched, no matter how justified they may be, haven't the slightest importance."

"But..."

"The intellectual lives a tragedy. At the bottom of his heart he is discontented with the present society, but by his practical activity he is one of its pillars. Look at yourself, for instance. Let's say you become a schoolmaster. You'll have to stuff the children's heads with the same stale lies and humbug of which you yourself are disgusted, to exalt in them chauvinism, anti-Semitism, etc., because otherwise you'll be expelled and will starve. And in the end you'll feel sure that things are all right as they are. A time comes when you must believe in something, and it is so convenient that this something should be just the official 'ideas,' those which give you your bread."

Andrei rebelled:

"You're always generalizing. And often falsely, to my opinion. You forget that all people are not alike."

"But constrained by their belly they 'act' alike."

"Cowards."

"And the brave ones... a bit later."

"What's to be done then?"

"Listen to that! I think you're also feeling the urge to believe in something. Do you need a theory to justify

yourself in your own eyes? Or your present aspirations?"

"I do not!" Andrei flared up. "I always want to do what I think proper."

"And do you get anywhere?"

"Yes. I do. I am not ashamed of myself."

"Humbug! It doesn't help anybody."

"I think you're wrong there. Sometimes examples shatter consciences."

Schwartz burst out laughing.

Andrei would not and could not agree with such views, but he had no arguments to oppose. There were many things he didn't understand, things of which he was now thinking for the first time, discovering them somewhat puzzled and bewildered.

Of all the people he knew there was none who did not curse the war, who didn't ask himself anxiously how the country would come out of it. He was recalling uncle Palli's words, when they had been expecting heroic stories:

"What business have we in Russia?"

When the subject of the district-wide competition was made known: "The Holy War — Catalyser of Energies," he decided not to compete. There was no point in putting down high-sounding words, to be presented with a diploma and two heroic books by Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu, in the midst of a celebration held at the Palace of Culture, as had happened two or three years ago!

He went all the same to school that day. It was raining, and he had nowhere to go, to play truant. But when Suslănescu who was conducting the competition in their form held a short opening speech, talking about brave ancestors, about Rumania's destiny, he was seized with fury. This was the same Suslănescu who, when they were only the two of them, or with Lucian, sighed for freedom and complained that he was compelled to support things in which he didn't believe. And now he was called to do the same! He began to write and it seemed as if the ideas were filing up by themselves, ideas thought out long ago. When the two hours were up, Suslănescu collected the papers, then said with a broad smile:

"I trust no one will mind if we now learn the contents of the prize-winning paper. Let's ask Mr. Sabin to read out to us what he has written."

Andrei rose in his bench. He seemed to be surrounded by an unnatural stillness. His ink-stained fingers were trembling. He began in a strange voice:

"I am requested to write about the war. I could put down high-sounding sentences about Trajan and Decebal and other sacred heroes, about all the wars which are also sacred, but I cannot."

What followed is known.

CHAPTER VI

Andrei felt no satisfaction in recollecting those moments. He didn't know the reason, but that was his real state of mind. He did not regret what he had done, because he could not have acted differently.

What then ? He had not the slightest idea. He lay on the fine, warm sand, looking at the clear sky and thinking of nothing. A yearning for kindness and understanding lulled him like a fluid, but it dispersed by evening, when he had to go home.

All his efforts to break his father's inscrutable silence were unsuccessful. As if he hadn't heard him, Octavian stared intently at a corner of the room, while his mother spoke to him on the sly with something like complicity and compassion in her eyes. Every morning on the way to his "island," he would say to himself: 'Maybe today something will happen... Maybe I'll discover what is to be done.' But hours passed listlessly and monotonously and his thoughts were inconsistent.

On the fourth day, about noon, shouts were heard up the river, then the splashing of oars and Teddie Varga's shrill voice:

"Hullo, Robinson!"

Andrei jumped to his feet quickly, picked up his clothes wishing to hide among the osiers, but it was too late: a large boat was nearing the shore. The whole "gang" was there in bathing-suits, shouting and splashing each other. Andrei looked at them with indifference as they came alongside but started when he saw Sonia among them. Teddie put his arm round his shoulders and began to dance about.

"Well, Andrei, I see you've discovered the garden of Eden!"

"Quite," returned Andrei smiling.

"And you haven't said a word about it! Lucian has been looking for you desperately. I don't know what splendid theory *à la* Descartes he wants to impart to you! So, we take possession of your land. We shall call on you every day!"

"You're welcome!"

"Ah! let me introduce you to a hero," Teddie beckoned to an athletic youngster with a small black attractive moustache, "Flight-lieutenant Fred Ghika, who has shot down a Boeing Fortress at Ploești, but was forced to descend by parachute."

"Then we can just as well say he's been shot down by the Americans."

"Why — the officer smiled placidly — they've got guns galore on board, damn them... Sorry!" and he put his fingers to his lips.

Teddie whispered:

"You see, he's fallen for Sonia *coup de foudre*. Men like him proceed quickly."

Ghika had rushed into the water shouting:

"Are you coming, Miss Sonia?"

She shook her head and,walking up to Andrei, asked him:

"Why haven't you called on us? Why are you hiding?"

"I don't know," he whispered and added: "I think it 's silly of me. I can't stay at home. My parents have found out... and..."

"Why did you do... that?" she asked him so hopelessly that Andrei was dumbfounded. So she realized that he'd burnt his boats! He sighed and said bitterly:

"If you... Sonia, had been different..."

"What, am I to blame?" Sonia asked quickly and coldly.

Andrei kept his eyes cast down obstinately.

'If I were like the others — he thought — everything between us would have gone normally.' He looked up at Sonia; in her white bathing costume she looked very young, but there was more assurance, more calm in her glances than in his.

"I don't need anybody's compassion," he said through clenched teeth.

"Surely — she smiled gloomily — you need a manageable person who would sympathise with all her heart." She bent down quickly, picked up a dry twig and broke it between her fingers. She asked, looking sideways: "Would you be happy then?"

"I don't understand you," he answered in astonishment.

"Neither do I understand you, Andrei. You have such a knack of complicating things... And finally you yourself don't know what you want." She fell silent and scratched the sand with her bare foot. "I think it's pride that makes you do it."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"False pride."

"You can't understand," he said curtly. Then, changing his mind, he tried to smile: "Nobody could guess how inflexible your will is, Sonia. However, I think you'll be happy, because you don't trouble about problems."

Sonia came nearer and laid her hand on his arm.

"And why do *you* do it?" she asked softly, almost as though she were sorry for him.

"Because I'm satisfied with nothing!" he burst out. "I loathe all I see around me, do you understand? To realize that every word, every gesture of ours is different from what we wish to say or do! Sickening! To think that sooner or later I shall be a kind of Suslănescu too, and nothing else. Maybe a day will come, when all this will be forgotten, but then, at forty, life won't have any meaning." He wrung his hands. "Here we are, for instance, the two of us... All could have been different..."

"What do you mean?" she asked, avoiding his look.

"Different," Andrei answered faintly. (If I told her again that I love her, it would be like begging.) I shall go to the country, Sonia," he said, looking sideways. "There is plenty of peace there."

She bit her lips.

"Must you?"

"Yes!" he replied emphatically.

They both were silent, unhappy.

Towards evening they all got into the boat and sailed up the river. Something painful was choking Andrei; he felt guilty towards Sonia. He asked himself: 'Does she care for me, or am I the victim of yet another illusion?'

Their silence had overcome the others too. Teddie kept asking him with his eyes: 'Have you quarrelled?'

At the bathing place they parted.

"I'll write to you," he said mechanically, avoiding her glances. "And I'll come back... and..."

"Andrei!"

"Good-bye, Sonia... Good-bye..."

He turned quickly and walked away. That very moment he remembered Schwartz and decided to call on him. Schwartz had a good dose of cynicism. They would quarrel a little, and he'd forget the shame that choked him. 'I'm behaving like a cur. I'm not any better than the others. I strike whomever I can, because I myself have been struck. I put on the airs of a martyr, pretending to be misunderstood, damn me! Lucian is right. Even my way of thinking is vulgar, reflecting suburban romanticism of the worst taste. Things taken ready-made from books... sham things... Pooh!'

In the crowded tram Andrei wondered: 'Why do I always expect the solving of my problems to come out of a talk? What can Schwartz tell me? Just his favourite phrase that 'this country is going to the dogs'!'

He realized, however, that he met Schwartz merely to be encouraged. His way of thinking and of talking possessed something methodical and cold, the very thing that Andrei was lacking. And Schwartz's sarcasm was more incisive, more precise, while Andrei's outbursts of mockery were passionate, severe and in most cases unjust. He had often thought: 'If anybody could build a single man out of me, Lucian and Schwartz, that man would tread with a very firm step in life.'

He got off the tram and began to walk impatiently. Schwartz lived in the western suburb, the other manufacturing quarter of the town, that had so far not been bombarded. He opened the small iron gate, walked up a footpath overrun with weeds and rang three times at the door of a house plunged in darkness. He waited for a long time, but nobody answered the door. 'Maybe he isn't in.' He went round the house as far as under Schwartz's window. He guessed that behind the blackout blind there was light. He rapped with his fingers, shouting.

"Come on, open the door! It's me, Andrei!" 'I suppose he's heard about it all,' he said to himself, while Schwartz unlocked the door.

"Come in," invited him Schwartz in his sharp, dry voice. "There's somebody with me."

"It doesn't matter," replied Andrei disappointed.

They entered a small, high-ceilinged room. The furniture consisted of a sofa, a table, some chairs and piles of books. From the ceiling an old lamp with glass drops was hanging from a sort of pulley.

When Andrei came in, a thin, swarthy-looking man stood up and took up his cap from the table.

"One of my friends," Schwartz introduced him to Andrei.

The man nodded, muttered a name, then turned towards Schwartz:

"Then it's settled... I'm off. Good night."

When Schwartz came back, Andrei said, puzzled:

"I'm afraid he went away because of me. Who is he?"

"A neighbour... He dropped in to borrow books, He is eager to learn."

Schwartz had stopped before the window, with his back to Andrei who was gazing at his thin, child-like figure, his prominent shoulder-blades, his thick hair cut short in the German manner. He coughed. Then Schwartz turned to him, smiling.

"How are you, you hero?"

"So you've heard too?"

Andrei leaned back on the chair and put out his hand for a book. Schwartz asked him, looking at him tensely through the lenses of his spectacles:

"Tell me the truth, you're sorry, aren't you? Say!"

Andrei was silent for some moments, then he lit a cigarette and said laughing:

"You're probably thinking that these gestures — the cigarette, the box of matches — were meant to let me gain time and find a dignified reply. Well, I don't know what to say. Sometimes I'm sorry, but at other times... I should anyhow sooner or later have done the same thing."

"What did you write in that paper?"

"That I'm sick of everything: of school, of the lies we are told, of the hypocrisy we live in."

"Oh, did you?" Schwartz stared at him attentively, almost strenously. "Where did you get all this from?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. But as I was writing I thought: 'It's inhuman that this should last. Inhuman.' "

"Did you read it in class? What did the boys say?"

"Nothing... What could they have said?"

"Indeed,who cares about your trials?" Schwartz snubbed him angrily. "Just a gratuitous act, wasn't it? A reaction under a momentary impulse, *à la* Lafcadio, wasn't it?"

Bewildered, Andrei gulped. He had not expected to be blamed by Schwartz.

"Who profited by your heroic gesture? And, after all, do you know why you did it?"

For the purpose of *finding* myself," replied Andrei, feeling at once how silly his words sounded.

Schwartz pulled up a chair for himself and sat down in front of Andrei.

"Confound you, Andrei!" he said laughing and tapping his friend's knees.

Somewhat hurt, Andrei said:

"All I did was out of sincerity..." (This too sounded foolish.)

"Hang your sincerity! Sincerity! Honesty! Words! Sincere to what, to whom?"

"To myself..." Andrei felt he was getting angry. "Would you rather I used big words? To the country? To Rumania?"

"I'd rather you did. Then, supposing you were wrong, you'd find your way, at least. What is your discontent compared with that of the men at the front, for instance? Or with that of the whole country?"

"Don't you think it's a particle of it?"

"Quite insignificant! You, the intelligentsia! 'Oh, my system of thinking is affected... Oh! I can't be myself... Oh! I oscillate between passion and duty!'..."

"You're down on me, and I don't see why."

Schwartz got to his feet, took a few steps, then, without looking at him said:

"D'you know what is interesting in this country? The incapacity of our intelligentsia to draw conclusions, no matter what kind of conclusions. They worry, meditate, sketch — very rarely — a faint gesture, then give in. Our literature is full of such types. Caragiale established some kind of degrees. I don't remember it clearly: at eighteen, a nihilist, at twenty-five a liberal, at forty — a conservative... Hamlet's curse seems to weigh on us."

"You're trying to establish who is responsible, I think!"

"In a certain way, I do. In fact, things are far simpler. Uneasiness, discontent and worry, until one has feathered one's nest. As a matter of fact I think what they call 'to become oneself' is nothing else but that. If we justify and theorize all this, we obtain a splendid, but indigestible stew. Only a few naive people still harm their stomach with it, during their youth."

"Like me, for instance."

"Yes." Schwartz moved closer. "Perhaps you expected something else from me, but, you see, I'm honest too, in my way."

"We all have a thirst for happiness in us," whispered Andrei faintly.

"*A personal one of our own.* And in its name we commit consciously and unconsciously all sorts of acts of treason. Happiness is a matter of science and laboratory, Andrei, a common effort."

"I see. No one profited by what I did, from the utilitarian point of view. I'm afraid that all these must be far simpler in fact, although we talk about them as if they were clouds."

"No," returned Schwartz, "they're not at all simple. On the contrary. You are deceived by appearances. If you were a physician and discovered a new serum, your discontent would make you fight and impose your truth, if you were hindered. Then you wouldn't have the feeling of this uselessness."

"Do you too charge me with want of belief in something," cried Andrei, "like Father Potra?"

"Not at all. I charge you with something else, though I don't like the word. The fact that you don't ask yourself continually: why, why? You are sentimental in your judgment. All things have a cause."

"And *causa causarum* is God," smiled Andrei sarcastically. "Thank you."

"I don't know whether such a thing exists," continued Schwartz seriously. "All I know is that there is a world, a mixed world which is not good and which has got to be changed."

"And isn't this romanticism?"

"Maybe, but of another kind."

They had smoked a lot. A bluish, choking haze floated in the room.

"What are your intentions for the present?" asked Schwartz.

"I think I'll go to the country."

"Very well. I advise you to do so. You may get... into trouble here."

"Why?" wondered Andrei.

"Just so."

When they parted, Andrei shook his thin hand.

"I think I still know something, Iani. I know that life should not be lived anyhow."

The sleeping town looked deserted, uninhabited, plunged in darkness. 'Yes, I'll leave,' thought Andrei. 'Things are different there, in the country. The places, the people.'

He closed his eyes. The finest recollections of his life were pictures from the village: early springtime, when the dirty snow still lingers in the shady corners, while in the sun silvery grass is growing; the first notes of the cuckoo in the cherry-trees in the backyard, the green watered rill on whose surface floated motionless goggle-eyed frogs, the woods at the beginning of May, the fresh, bright verdure and the deep shadows of the willows, the mysterious rustle of the sedge shaken by the arrow-like gliding of a lizard, the solemn herons gathered in a conclave at Cotu Popii — where the water becomes as wide as a pond — the smooth flight of the sparrow-hawks crucified in the sky, the undulating seas of green corn-fields, or later towards autumn, when the days grow shorter and the moving shadow of a cloud sails lazily over the sun-bathed field, the storms, when the green-violet heavens roar and over the wind-lashed trees hovers threatening the *sherkan* which, according to what old men say, is a dragon changed into a furious cloud; the grey October rains, the damp cold everywhere, inducing one to do nothing but sleep, overcome by laziness; or in winter, when the Teuz River is but an icy steel-like ribbon, and the brown, dry swords of the sedge clash against one another with a little harsh noise, shedding every time a fine silvery dust; the quiet snow-falls, with great flakes covering everything with a soft fur in which it is so pleasant to plunge up to the knees... The people too are different, they are freer there... His mother had often told him the story of his grandmother's life: how they had gone when young to Hungary, to shed off their poverty, how they had saved every penny to come back to their village and be the first in it. Then came the revolution and they lost all. They came back to the village as poor as they had been when they left and were forced to begin life all over again. And when grandfather could no longer stand it, he died.

Everything is so simple there...

His mother was very glad to hear he wished to leave. She had never mentioned his ejection from school again. She would look at him furtively and anxiously only when he didn't notice she was doing so.

His father behaved as if Andrei did not exist. He kept silent even when he was told that the boy was leaving. Then Ana lost her temper and shouted furiously:

"Octavian, don't you understand that Andrei is going away?"

Sabin looked up from his plate and said coldly:

"All right."

About noon Iurcovici called Andrei outside in the yard, took him aside and told him hastily:

"Somebody's been asking about you, Mr. Andrei, somebody from the police."

"Where from?" asked Andrei, startled.

"From the police. Lucky he spoke to me and I found him out. They're such fools, these men. They wished to know who calls here."

"Nonsense," replied Andrei waving his hand.

It seemed to him incredible. He entered the house, but was restless all day long. He knew he ought to go to Sonia's, but, if he did, he would no longer feel inclined to go to the country.

He would just write her a few lines.

'But maybe I mean nothing to her,' he said to himself wearily. 'Just one more illusion like so many others.' Towards evening, about eight, he had fallen asleep when his mother came in and shook his arm.

"Get up, Andrei, Lucian's here."

"Ask him to come in," he muttered still half asleep. His head ached.

"I did, but he refused. He says he's come to take you for a stroll... Go, Andrei. Lucian is very fond of you."

"Alright, alright..."

He dressed quickly and went out into the yard. With his arms behind his back, Lucian was staring absently at the opposite wall. He was wearing a dark-coloured coat, unfit for such a warm evening. They shook hands, both of them feeling embarrassed. Lucian said:

"Let's go for a walk. It's such a pleasant evening."

"Where shall we go?"

"Just along the streets... It's quite a time since we were together, isn't it?"

They went out. Lucian turned hurriedly into a by-street. They remained silent for some time. Andrei said to himself angrily: 'He's pretending to be offended.' Then he asked himself: 'What if I told him that his mother asked me to stop calling on them? The usual remonstrances, intricacies... all so meaningless.'

"What have you been doing lately... Andrei?"

Lucian always pronounced his name with a kind of unaccountable reticence.

"Nothing. And you?"

"Nothing much. I've read a little, and waited for you. I thought you'd come at last. Tell me please, what happened that evening at the party?"

Andrei frowned. What was the use of this question when he knew perfectly well what had happened? Surely they had talked about it, had discussed it in detail... Lucian caught his hand, turned towards him his face distorted with anxiety and whispered excitedly:

"Andrei! You must leave at once! Do you understand? At once."

"What's come over you?" Andrei said in surprise.

"Don't laugh, Andrei," Lucian begged him. "It's a very serious matter, far more serious than you think. You must leave the town as soon as possible — tomorrow, or better today..."

"How provoking you are!" Andrei shouted at him, losing his temper. "What's all the mystery?"

"Andrei — Lucian fidgeted — don't ask me questions... When I tell you the matter is very serious, you must believe me."

"What is the 'serious matter'?"

Lucian took a few steps as if intending to depart, but came back to his side. He seemed tremendously frightened:

"Tell me... Andrei, do you... do you trust me as a friend?"

"Of course I do!" replied Andrei hastily.

"Then... when I tell you, when I beg you, you must understand me and leave as soon as possible."

He seemed so much in earnest that Andrei immediately connected his words with what Iurcovici had told him. He winced:

"Is it not... is it not?..."

"I can't tell you what the matter is. Will you go away?"

"I haven't the least intention of doing so," Andrei answered unconcernedly. "Let's get on! We've stopped in the middle of the way like... like conspirators..."

He felt Lucian's fingers squeezing his arm. With a sigh Lucian shuffled on.

"Listen here, Andrei," he said wearily a few minutes later. "Your paper... has produced a sensation greater than I feared. General Belega called on us yesterday and was closeted with my father in the study. I was in the library and overheard all they said. The general said that... it wasn't advisable you should call on us any longer."

"I won't!" rapped out Andrei wrathfully.

"For God's sake, that is not the point! And listen, yesterday the mayor and his family also called on us. A real circus. I had to kiss his wife's, that former shopkeeper's hand. The mayor asked me sternly: 'Lucică, does that Bolshy still come here? You ought to cut him, that's what you ought to do.' And finally, today at dinner, father was very thoughtful. When the coffee was brought, he told me confidently to try and warn you to leave the town. It is likely," said Lucian, his voice lowering more and more to a whisper, "that the Secret Police have been taking an interest in you."

"I know," answered Andrei calmly.

An alarm-bell was shrilling continually within his brain. He was frightened.

"Andrei, listen to my proposal... We all, I, Teddie, Mother and Mademoiselle Laugier are leaving next week for Moneasa. Come with us. We'll take a suitcase full of books with us, all the contents of a book-case... Will you promise to think of it?" He smiled awkwardly. "In the evening, at dusk, we'll sit on a bench..."

"Nonsense," said Andrei waving his hand.

"Not at all. I talked about it to my family. They all agree."

"What will a father not do for his obedient son," Andrei chanted looking up at the sky.

"You won't manage to vex me. Tell me please: do you accept?"

"You realize very well that I can't." He stared at him. "You do, don't you?"

Lucian bit his lips.

"What then?" he asked, quite distressed.

"I'll leave, if you say things are so 'serious' as all that."

"When?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Will you let me see you off?"

Lucian was filled with a heavy, languid sadness. The prospect of a journey, and holidays at Moneasa without Andrei seemed to him opressive, boring. If only Andrei understood how fond he was of him. If he only would try at least once to live all over again, just the two of them, the first days of their friendship, three years ago, when no day passed without them seeing each other. They talked about the books they read, about great things: the future, man's duty always to be true to himself; they dreamt of doing very great deeds, both of them — and of their friendship that would never come to an end. Afterwards, so many outside things interfered! And at one time a very thick crystal wall seemed to have risen between them, he didn't know precisely when, and more particularly, why. Since then he had very seldom talked to Andrei about his troubles, about his inner victories and defeats; neither did Andrei tell him anything. A painful curiosity had filled his heart: what would Andrei do there, all alone, in a small village situated in the endless plain, a village which he somehow fancied dusty, monotonous, incapable of having any influence upon the mind and soul, unlike the clean mountain hamlets with their lively inhabitants and their wild landscape of an impressive beauty.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked Andrei.

"Of...('I ought to tell him... of us both, of our friendship, of the sorrow of parting, but I can't')... of commonplace things, Lucian: travelling preparations. A tiresome

trip in a third-class carriage... The... the stillness of the village... the aimless rambles, of the kindly and restful tedium."

"Andrei..." Lucian hesitated a little, then, plucking up courage, asked shyly and frightened: "Why have you drifted away from me?"

He immediately felt ashamed, but the question had given him some relief. He even knew what the answer would be: 'It's not true, Lucian. How could you think of such rot?' He noticed, however, that Andrei was silent, so he repeated the question, terrified: Why?"

"I don't know," Andrei replied, looking another way.

"Do you want me to come to the station with you tomorrow?"

"Yes, do. And now, good night, Lucian. Don't think any longer of all that childish nonsense." (Why can't I tell him that, in spite of all, life is so interesting, and that our worries are groundless? That we are both of us young and...)

"Good night, Andi," said Lucian shaking his hand resignedly. "I'll call on you tomorrow and take you to the station."

Andrei went home and from the yard, through the lighted kitchen window, he saw Răducanu, his former form master, waiting inside. He entered quickly, delighted.

"Here you are at last, you fiend!" laughed Răducanu and shook both his hands vigorously. "I was talking with your parents about you."

Just then Octavian entered too. He had been to the pub round the corner to get a bottle of wine for the "gentleman." Without looking at Andrei, he poured out a glass of wine for him too. They clinked glasses.

"You know," said Răducanu laughing, "next year I'll be no longer your schoolmaster. I've been transferred to the Dobruja. In consequence of your behaviour, you lion, you democrat!"

He noticed that Mr. Sabin's countenance had become gloomy. He hadn't understood him. He got up nimbly and put his arms round Andrei's shoulders:

"I'm proud of you!" he said with sparkling eyes. "Yes, proud, Andrei... Do not worry a bit. Next year we'll begin our lessons in a better and fairer world."

"God grant it!" muttered Octavian. He lifted his glass: "To Great Rumania!'

"To Free Rumania!" proposed Răducanu gravely. "And to this young fellow too!"

"He'd better not interfere in other people's business."

"Do you think he will be taken back, sir?" inquired Ana.

"Yes, madam. And, moreover, with all due honours. Thank you for the drink. I must go now. Come a little bit of the way with me, you fiend."

Răducanu lived in the same street, a few houses away. As soon as they were in the street, he handed Andrei the packet he had brought.

"A few books, Andrei... *Le feu, Castellion contre Calvin*... Don't worry, my dear boy. You must keep on being honest to the end. This country needs men... Dear Andrei..." Răducanu was moved; his voice trembled. "I'll write you... Remember to reply. And we'll soon meet again."

He hugged him and kissed both his cheeks.

That night his parents quarrelled. Andrei heard every word; it hurt him to hear them and he pressed his eyelids, trying to fall asleep.

"How can you be so heartless?" asked Ana. "It's cruel of you!"

"Why didn't he come and ask to be forgiven?"

"So that you should humiliate him? You keep silent like an oyster."

Octavian coughed in a dignified manner.

"Is that the way to talk to me, mother?"

"You deserve it. Instead of helping him, we..."

"What? I? Don't you see how darned 'clever' he is?"

"Didn't you act like that too, Octavian? What made you talk against the Marshal as you did? He is as rash as you are... Tomorrow morning you'll say good-bye to him, won't you? Don't destroy the child's soul..."

"We'll see about that later on..."

"I trust to your kind heart."

'Poor mother,' thought Andrei.' One more life wasted. What would he tell father tomorrow morning? The old man wanted him to beg to be forgiven, to ask for his help.

No, he could not. That would mean to acknowledge that he was guilty of something.'

In the morning his father roused him. Andrei jumped hastily out of bed, and both stood looking at one another rather puzzled.

"Write to your Uncle Gavril," Sabin began slowly. "He's promised to take an interest in your situation. He's talked to Dr. Lucaci, the headmaster. He said: 'If anybody in Bucharest has to get his palm greased, I'll do it.' These were his very words. Write to him and thank him."

"Alright, father . . .",

"Don't worry . . . God bless you . . . Take care of yourself."

He kissed his forehead hastily and went to his office. His mother gave him a good deal of advice: what he ought to tell his grandmother, also Aunt Emilia. She explained to him how to arrange his luggage in the train.

"I'll come soon. We'll be together. Talk to Emilia, as she is unhappy too... And don't be anxions. Your father said that everything would be all right. The headmaster is fond of you."

Lucian came an hour earlier. He kissed Ana's hand and stood in the middle of the little room, looking embarrassed.

"Let's be off," said Andrei. "We've got a great many things to get ready."

His mother shed a few tears as she did every time they parted, and Andrei hugged her thin, shrunken body.

"Be a good boy, Andi. Don't stand on the carriage steps! Take care of yourself. I've put some pocket-money in your bag."

"Thanks most awfully..."

Andrei snatched the big portmanteau that was tied up with a cord, as its rusty hinges were unreliable, and went out of the yard with Lucian.

"Would you like me to help you?" Lucian asked every ten steps.

"Thanks... don't trouble..."

They went through the bomb-ploughed park. The broken-down trees stretched out their white barkless branches. The shattered benches were scattered about, together

with bits of bricks, heaps of rubble, scraps of paper. The station quarter was deserted. Most people had moved away. Only those who had nowhere to go to had built out of the remains a kind of shed in which they lived, cooked, ate and slept, two or three families together.

All those sights were now so familiar to Lucian. He had visited the quarter several times after the bombardment, as if the war had passed this way many years before, leaving those ruins behind it.

"Look, this is where I fell down in the dust," Andrei showed with the toe of his shoe. "I thought it was the end; it was frightfully hot."

The square in front of the station had been cleared and the building with its black walls, the empty sockets of its windows, the burnt beams and the twisted iron bars looked like a fleshless skeleton. In the roofless waiting-room people were lying on the floor, the peasants eating bread with peppered bacon, some soldiers in field uniform, their knapsacks crammed, fully armed and with their helmet on, slept snoring loudly. Andrei bought a ticket and both went on to the platform. The bricks were burning-hot, and everywhere floated a smell of extinguished fire, of dirt and of smashed water-closets. "What a suitable place for a parting!" Lucian said disconsolately.

Andrei put down the portmanteau, sat down on it and made room for Lucian to sit by him.

"Let's hope the train won't be late."

Lucian made no reply. Now that Andrei was leaving, he no longer minded anything.

There was a German train on a branch line. The soldiers in tatters — they had probably come from the front for re-manning — were no longer like the smart warlike troops that had passed through the town some years before. Their uniforms were hanging in rags; a thin, fair young *Feldwebel* with spectacles was treading funnily in his too wide torn boots. They all seemed disheartened. They fetched water in buckets and washed themselves in turns; some of them, their pocket-mirrors leaning against the carriage-steps, were shaving, others were rambling aimlessly across the lines, looking at the ruined station with apathetic eyes, as though at a familiar sight.

"D'you see them?" said Andrei. "It's the end..."

"Poor wretches," answered Lucian, shaking his head. Then he commented, trying to ward off the ambiguity: "As human beings, I mean. Where do they come from? Where do they go to? What is in store for them at home? Many of them are dreaming perhaps of the quiet of their home, the image they created of it during the terrors of the battle."

"They have got what they were looking for."

The train entered the station puffing, full of women bringing their goods to the market, peasants carrying scythes, on their way to richer villages in search of labour, soldiers, non-commissioned officers going on leave. Andrei kissed Lucian quickly and jumped on to the steps of a carriage before the train stopped. After a while he put his head out of the window, his hair quite dishevelled:

"It's alright! I've made room for my chest. That's all."

"Andi!" Words came crowding to Lucian's lips: "Listen. Write to me. Do not forget. We've such heaps of things to tell one another. You'll realize this. I'm staying here a week longer. I'll let you know our address at Moneasa. And... should you change your mind, you can come, that is to say... I beg you to come. Will you? Promise!"

"I promise," said Andrei generously.

Lucian smiled sceptically as the train started. Andrei produced his handkerchief and waved exaggeratedly, on purpose. Lucian's face had a funny expression that moved him.

"I'll write to you," he shouted from the window... A lot... dozens of pages... as I used to..."

Leaning out of the carriage-window, Andrei stared at Lucian's silhouette growing smaller and smaller, beckoning to him; then, relieved, he sat down in a corner-seat close to a soldier who was sleeping, open-mouthed, his head leaning backwards.

Lucian stood a while on the platform. The train was nothing but an earthworm winding its way along the outskirts of the town; then a turning made it invisible and the black, thick clouds of smoke dispersed over the station, leaving only a mist behind.

He felt low-spirited; he would have rather been with Andrei in that crowded carriage smelling of fresh, overheated paint, of perspiration, of strong tobacco smoke. Closing his eyes, he felt them wet. He tried to recapture Andrei's image: a lean, sunburnt face, the intensely green, piercing eyes, the broad, sunburnt forehead and soft locks of black hair. There was no use asking himself now, as he used to do so often: 'What attracts me to him? Why is his presence so soothing?' He only wanted not to forget him. Andrei's asperities came second now; so did their new form of relationship. He only wished to recall the satisfaction felt so often, the feeling that their friendship was the purest and the finest thing in his life. But now all that remained was the feeling of utter, incomprehensible, secret loneliness, as bitter as jealousy. He would go home, shut himself up in his sunny room and begin to read.

At 3 o'clock he would be summoned to lunch, his father would ask him how he had spent the day, and his mother answer proudly: 'He's been studying,' and in all those details, ridiculous and stupid as they would seem to Andrei, a quietness and a certain satisfaction was hidden, the safety of the morrow, as if imperceptible but always present, his parents' love, pride and admiration materialized around him.

A German soldier in shirt-sleeves passed by him humming mechanically *Lili Marlen*. Lucian's eye followed him: he was a youngster, not more than eighteen. He wondered: 'What will become of us, where shall we be — myself, Andrei, all the people I know — ten years hence?' The date was so very remote, almost unimaginable, just as, for instance, Michael the Brave's existence as a man seemed hard to conceive.

Dejected, sweating and very sad, he set out slowly for home.

The journey to Lunca by the slow train lasted two hours. In former times, when still a child, it had seemed to him excessively long, perhaps because he was anxious to get there sooner. He used to follow the telegraph posts in their flight, with the strange play — very mysterious at that time — of the wires that went alternatively up and down incessantly.

Now, Andrei read all the time, without talking to

anybody. Before reaching the station where he was to get off, he carried his portmanteau along the corridor. Three soldiers were talking in a low whisper:

"Pandele's bolted. He's cleverer than us."

"Shut up, you fool!" said a gipsy-like corporal losing his temper. "A bullet's sure to get you."

"Isn't it just the same on the battle-field! For us it's just the same, damn it all! Only..."

Andrei got off before the train stopped. The little station, built of whitewashed, sun-scorched planks, the dusty acacias, the fountain worked by a wheel, the station-master's guinea-hens, the trucks forsaken on a railway-line, all were there. And in the distance, like a white line, the village.

He didn't get off so easily. Mr. Turculeţ, the station-master, rushed at him, shook his hand, said how glad he was to see him, then declared, blinking: "*Kaputt!*" Andrei, who had to listen to his strategical appreciations, the latest news from the B.B.C., was then invited in to see Liviuţa.

"I insist, you must come in, we'll have some beer kept cold in the well. You know, I've bought Liviuţa a piano... She's awfully gifted! She plays symphonies and operas, but I like nothing except our tunes like:

Gallant Iancu, great brave Iancu, be with us!

All these things were funny but soothing as well. The path of platitude or perhaps the golden middle way. Mr. Turculeţ chattered on incessantly; he narrated all he and his wife had done for Liviuţa in order to give her a dowry: they owned about thirty-five acres of land, they had flocks of ducks which they sent to the town-market, free of charge, by train, they fed four pigs and a breeding-sow, they wore rags, but they were happy when they saw Liviuţa descending from a first-class carriage (she had a free pass), stepping gracefully over the lines.

The girl was rather silly and conceited. Mr. Turculeţ showed her to the guests as if she were a trinket: "My little angel, please recite that poem in French." After a great deal of fuss, Liviuţa would recite through her nose:

Deux mulets cheminaient, l'un d'avoine chargé
L'autre portant l'argent de la gabelle...

Since he had bought her a piano, he begged her with the same paternal tremolos:

"Play, my sweet, something by that Mozart chap... a German, a Hun, but what an artist!"

When Liviuţa arrived after dressing up, Mr. Turculeţ left them alone and retired discreetly. She spoke affectedly, lifting her hands up to her neck like a nervous actress, but Andrei failed to hear what she was saying. Through the thin window curtain everything outside was gilded and remote. Liviuţa asked him something; he said "yes" and smiled. The girl sat down at the piano. Andrei gave a start: it was the same piece that Sonia had played to him once. The tune, as he had heard it then, produced in him a tender melancholy, a mild feeling of renunciation. Liviuţa played badly, out of tune, and sniffed angrily. 'I've made a mistake with Sonia too,' thought Andrei. 'I expected something from, her some sort of... rot that one meets only in books. Perhaps, if I'd understood her better, many things would have been simpler, easier to bear.' He begged Liviuţa to go on playing. Still his paper had been a sort of liberation. He felt that, before writing it, he had only been living conventionally, as if acting a part in a play. He ought not to think of the past any more.

He sprang up to his feet, said good-bye to Liviuţa who looked bewildered, and went out. He walked down over the dried-up pond and cut across the fields.

It was hot. The thistles on the roadside did not stir Only the translucent horizon was shivering. There was a smell of heated earth and sun-scorched weeds. Andrei walked for a long time joyously and reached at last the road bordered with old, dusty mulberry-trees.

A turning revealed the village drowned in the green colour of the plum-trees and acacias. Above them rose the waving tops of the chestnut-trees in the churchyard, as well as the steeple — long and thin like a stork's neck.

Home...

CHAPTER VII

Every time he came to the country, Andrei had to tell his grannie and his aunt everything, down to the most trivial details, of what was going on in town. The old woman, huddled in a chair by the kitchen oven, would nod thoughtfully, and in the end, no matter what Andrei spoke about, would say:

"Yes, times are getting worse and worse."

Aunt Emilia, a small woman, nimble and child-like, had warned him:

"Darling, don't tell your grandmother anything about your misfortune. I quite understand you, my dear. You were standing in their way, they wanted to get rid of

you. But never mind... as long as we live, you needn't worry."

Andrei smiled uneasily. Aunt Emilia thought that in high school the prizes went naturally only to the children of the town's bigwigs: the generals, lawyers, engineers. The fact that Andrei had got ahead of them, had, of course, enraged them, and they had seized the first opportunity to ruin him. But grannie could not understand those things. She believed that a hard-working, diligent person must succeed, in spite of all and, if he doesn't, it means that it is his own fault and he is not worth anything. This belief had never left her. In her youth, when her husband had come back from the army — he had been in the Hussars — they had both gone to Hungary, driven away by terrible poverty. There, Mihai Moţ had a brother, the confidential business agent of a Jewish merchant. He found Mihai a job as a steward on Baron Bornemisza's estate. Both of them had drudged very hard, putting by every penny. They wanted to return home, to buy land and be the pick of the village. By and by, Mihai had come to be the man on whom the count relied completely, while the management of the house and the saving of the money were left to Ana. Then came the war, when one of their sons, Todor, was killed; then the revolution and the inflation, and they returned home as poor as they had left.

"It was our own fault," grannie would say, however. "We hadn't the pluck to invest our money in land over there. Land is land wherever it is. Today's money is worth nothing. It is paper, made to cheat people. It was all our fault."

Now, at the age of seventy-five, grannie would work untiringly looking after Emilia's household. She was ashamed when she was ill, and would never have told anybody when anything was the matter with her. Her son-in-law, George, Dan's father, had been reported missing at Stalingrad; grannie had been the only one able to comfort Emilia in those terrible hours when she had received the news:

"Don't give in, Emilia. If he's a man, he's sure to come back. You just look after the house and the property, and he'll be glad when he returns."

From his mother's tales Andrei tried to picture to himself his grandmother as a young, never tiring, despotic woman ruling her children's lives with an iron rod. She had had but one weakness: Pavel, her youngest son. He had been born when she was fifty, and she had secretly nourished for him a boundless love. She had let him do anything, she hadn't grudged him any money. The child had become a good-for-nothing expelled from all the schools; in the end he went to work in a factory. He drank, and, in order to be able to stand drinks to his countless friends, he would sell the very clothes off his back. Without a word, the old woman sent him more money. As if she were deaf, she would never listen to Emilia's reproaches. And at the age of thirty Pavel still had the mind of a child. Andrei and Dan loved him to distraction, since he joined them in all their childish games. After that he was sent to the front, and in 1943 the news came that Sergeant Pavel Moţ had fallen at Nalcic. It was in summer, the grandchildren were at home. They burst into loud weeping, but the old woman sat stiffly at the head of the table. After a time she said:

"May God rest his soul. Let's eat now, the soup's getting cold."

Emilia was very shocked and cried out amidst tears:

"For heaven's sake, mother, do you think of nothing else but your stomach?"

Grannie smiled wanly:

"We shan't bring him back to life again this way, either. May God forgive him. Amen." And she went to bed.

"She did the same when father died," Emilia said. "We were at home in the old house. Father was suffering from his heart; he died suddenly. Mother sent for her sister, they washed him, dressed him, lit the candles, and only after that did she come to us: 'Get up, children, for your father has died.' She is a heartless woman."

But remembering all this, Andrei told himself that perhaps it was something quite different, something far deeper and incomprehensible, a wisdom springing from somewhere, from the depths, like sap. Now, in her old age, grannie knew that much: Life is as it is; it must

however be lived. She even said as much whenever her daughters urged her to take some rest.

"Man must toil until his hour comes. Then he can rest for ever after."

Although she went to church every Sunday, the old woman believed in a strange God, to whom you had to pray that he should do you no harm. She did not fast, unable to understand the use of fasting, except that after too much fasting ploughmen got the jaundice.

Only in the evenings grannie would go out into the small garden in front of the school, and her gaze glided far away towards the Teuz hillock. When some widow passed, she would stop her and speak to her:

"Your's, Lucreția, died in Italy?"

"No, Mother Ana, in Russia."

"Is that so... I myself lost two over there as well. One in 1914, the other one about a year ago."

Once Andrei asked her what she was thinking of, and the old woman, as if awakening from a dream shook herself.

"Well, dear, of many things. This year there's going to be a good crop of wheat. We'll fill the loft. God will preserve us from hunger. I should like to see you two grown up and settled down." She advised him: "Make love to the station-master's daughter. Her father is giving her thirty-five acres, and clothes and furniture. They came here this spring. She is a good girl and knows her place."

Andrei could hardly refrain from laughing aloud.

Yes, here all things were adjusted and developed according to a ritual ordained for centuries. Love comes after marriage, or perhaps people didn't even know what love meant. He remembered some lines:

I believe eternity was born in the country.
Here every thought is slower...

Take for instance Aunt Emilia. She married young and built up her household. They bought land and as head master of the village school had the use of the land belonging to the school. Every year they sold eighty or ninety quintals of wheat. Uncle George was a quiet man, shut up in himself; he had a bookcase

full of books on Education, he loved his job. On holidays all the most important people in the village gathered: the women discussed about the best recipes for cakes, the men played cards at fifty *bani* the stake, and drank beer kept cool in the well, the children shrieked outside in the yard. Life went on, sheltered from all disturbance. And after the war, those who happen to have survived will come back and take up everything where they left off. The dead will be forgotten.

Aunt Emilia told him how many worries she had had with the school. Since George's departure she had taken over the management. The inspectors appreciated her; she was praised in the "School Monitor" and the village was proud of her. "She knows everything, just like a man. She is like mother Ana." Only Cordiaș, a neighbour's son, who had become a schoolmaster, reviled her everywhere. He was trying to become headmaster. He had never been able to stand George Teodorescu, a man from the "old kingdom,"* a "foreigner."

"He ought to be ashamed of himself," Emilia said indignantly. "Since he managed not to go to the front, he has kept intriguing. Everybody knows he shot himself in the hand, the impudent rascal!"

Andrei listened to her attentively, approving of what she said. Emilia kissed him and, looking towards Dan who, lolling on a small wooden bed was reading a book, said:

"Lucky there is still somebody to see how I wear myself out. As for Dan..."

"I see it mother, of course I do," Dan said weakly. "I admire you with all my heart."

"Heartless child..."

A few hours after his arrival, it seemed to Andrei that he had been there for a very long time. He went out into the clean court, then passed into the farm yard. He always came here when he was at Lunca, and with closed eyes tried to recapture something of the spell of childhood. Everything was as he had known it, only much smaller. He saw again the dried willow, amongst the branches

* After the First World War, the former Austro-Hungarian territories of Transylvania, Banat etc. the "new" provinces, were united to the "old Kingdom" of Rumania.

of which he had made himself a nest, where he used to hide for hours with a book in his hand; there was the pond overgrown with weeds thriving in the thick mud. He thought of their childhood with some weariness. Then he shook himself: 'Rot. Am I getting sentimental again?'

"Andrei!" he heard someone calling from the other yard beyond the pond. "Andrei! When did you come? Come quickly over here. We have a lot to say to one another!"

He smiled, recognizing Father Scarlat. The latter was standing in the sun, bare-headed, his blue-black hair hanging in curly wisps over his face. With one hand he was stroking his little black oily moustache, with the other he was holding up his trousers. He was wearing a military tunic with a captain's stripes. When Andrei crossed the drought-hardened bed of the pond, he rushed out to meet him, shook his hand then, showing his glittering white teeth, began to laugh loudly.

"Now, just fancy that, man, I've got off! It's incredible, but it's true. I've got off! I was called before the commission... You don't know what a military commission means nowadays! You have not the slightest idea. I got in and composed myself a distorted face. The colonel looked at me suspiciously. 'You son of a bitch,' I thought to myself. And the next moment I rushed up to him and began to catch flies. They discharged me. They said I 'did not enjoy the integrity of my mental faculties.' So you may congratulate me now for the way I got off!"

"I'm glad," Andrei said trying not to laugh.

" So'm I!" Scarlat turned round and began to roar: "Laboș! La-boh-oș!"

"What do you want now?" came a thick, embittered voice from the corridor of the house.

"Get three bottles of beer out of the well, right away. Andrei has come. Come on, look sharp, don't stand there gaping. Scoot!..."

"Just a minute, just a minute, since God has punished me and taken my senses. Oh, the crosses in the churchyard!"

Breathing hard and perspiring, Laboș made his appearance. He was a fat man, red in the face with a moustache as thick as a tow. He only looked about fifty or sixty,

although he was over seventy. He shook hands with Andrei, asked about his parents then, winking towards Scarlat, made a gesture with his hand towards his temple, as if to say that his son-in-law was not quite right in the head.

While Scarlat had gone into the house to ask his wife to prepare a little snack, Andrei was thinking, amused, of old Laboș's drama.

The latter had a daughter, Catița, who had lived for some time with a gendarmerie sergeant who was married and had two children; after that, Laboș married her off to Teodor Scarlat, the son of the poorest man in the village. The old wives said that, when old Scarlat died, a host of lice had tumbled off the corpse and begun to run about the house. Scarlat was a good-looking fellow, and Laboș, who had an inn and some land, kept him at Cernăuți to study theology. But he cursed the hour when he had wanted a priest for son-in-law, for — so everybody said — Scarlat was not quite sane. Immediately after the wedding he sold two young sheep, real beauties, as fat as pigs, and with the money he had a volume printed of heretical sermons of his own. The copies, about five hundred of them, were still lying about in the loft where the mice were gnawing at them. Laboș nearly had a stroke. He cried for the sheep as if someone of his family were dead, but what could he say to the priest? He was a gentleman and gentlemen are lunatics. He had grown to be the laughing-stock of the village. Everybody knew that at night, when he had to go out to the privy, the priest woke his father-in-law and made him accompany him, for Scarlat was afraid of the dark. Laboș, barefooted, in his night-shirt, his belly bulging, would stand holding a candlestick and beg him:

"Come on, Father, hurry up, for Christ's sake. I'm half dead with the cold... Curse him," he said to somebody invisible,"... see what he makes me do, me, an old man!" (Andrei and Dan once remained a whole night long on the watch, hoping to see this scene.)

From time to time, the priest got "ideas" into his head. Then he would walk about the whole house like mad, ruffling his hair and talking incoherently. Nobody was allowed to breathe, everybody had to go about on

tiptoe. Then Laboş would go to the stables and lie down in the hay, wishing he would die. At table, Scarlat taught him how to eat:

"Why, father, don't make such a noise with that soup! It makes me feel queasy."

"God has punished me!" said Laboş turning round to his wife, a thin woman who had been consumptive for years. "He says I don't eat decently, now in my old age... I'm fit only to take him to the privy, may God forgive me my sins!"

"Hush, Ioan," ordered him Laboş's wife. "He's a gentleman."

Laboş had gone to the bishop's with all kinds of presents, to secure his son-in-law's appointment as parish priest of the village. When he had reached his aim, and Scarlat had been appointed assistant priest until Father Pinteriu would be pensioned off, the happiness of Laboş — who in spite of all was proud to be a priest's father-in-law — did not last long, for, the first Sunday during service. Scarlat had a fight with the precentor whom he hit over the head with the censer, because his singing was not to his liking; he also cursed old Pinteriu in a loud voice, to the horrified dismay of the whole congregation. Crying bitterly, Father Pinteriu fled from the church in his vestments, and Scarlat coming out of the altar said to the congregation:

"It's over! Go home! You've had a long enough service! Off you go!"

The people complained to the bishop. Laboş had not succeeded in pacifying them, and Scarlat was sent to a mountain village where he behaved in such a manner that he was lucky to escape without any holes in his skin. Since then he told everybody that he was persecuted, that the bishop envied him and that it wouldn't be long before he showed everybody what he can do. He decided to become a military chaplain (he would have a rank, an orderly and a social standing), but on the day he got his stripes, the war broke out and he was sent to the front. He came on leave in 1943, stark, raving mad. He used to wake up at night howling, thinking that partisans had got into the house and wanted to cut his throat. Laboş told Catiţa:

"Listen, girl, we'd better put him into a lunatic asylum. Perhaps they'll make a man of him."

She swore at her father, cursed him and wanted to throw herself into the well. When his leave came to an end, Scarlat lay down flat in the middle of the road and they had to take him by force to the station. He was in the same regiment as Pavel, and the latter related that once after a fight, when they had to bury the dead, they were caught unawares by an artillery bombardment. Scarlat in his vestments jumped into a freshly-dug grave, pushed the dead body on top of himself and refused to come out of there, even when the shells had ceased falling.

Nevertheless, Scarlat was a learned man. He had read a lot and, when he was in a good mood, could tell interesting things. Andrei saw him coming out with a tray on which Lucreţia had put thin slices of bacon and pickled cucumbers. In his other hand he carried three bottles of beer. They sat down in the shed.

"What have you been writing lately?" Andrei asked inquisitively. (Father Scarlat was working on a modern Apocalypse.)

"*Inter arma silent musae!*" declared Scarlat picking his nose.

Suddenly he bent towards him mysteriously, and with eyes bulging out of his head whispered:

"Andrei... it's the end... You know that I'm not religious. The devil, priesthood, God — stuff and nonsense. But of late I have re-read the Apocalypse of the holy apostle John... I say holy just as a matter of habit... Believe me the apostle was raving mad. I am very glad you've come. To whom could I impart such discoveries? To Laboş, to Ecaterina? She is a kind woman, but a woman. Listen to me attentively. John was mad and like all madmen a visionary. I have been reading, and the fear of death, of a total, final death, my death, the death of society, of the world, of all and everything, seized me." He smiled wanly: "Ecaterina won't understand. She says: 'You are tired, Tudoriţă, go to bed, darling.' That is how she tries to soothe me... But this apostle, greater than Jesus Christ, was a madman. You know of course that

in the East lunatics are respected... And his pages... so disturbing."

He closed his eyes a moment and recited: "And I looked, and behold a grey horse, and the name of him who rode it was Death, and Hell followed on to him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with the sword, with hunger and with death, and with the beasts of the earth..."

Andrei checked a smile, just in time.

Scarlat went on very excited:

"And further on. (I'm sure you understand.) 'And the name of the star is called Wormwood; and the third part of the waters became like the wormwood, and many men died of the waters because they had turned bitter...' Help yourself to this beer before it gets warm, and listen, listen to me. I have had, while reading the Apocalypse, many revelations... 'And the number of the beast is six hundred and three score and six...' "

"It's all utter rubbish," said Andrei waving his hand impatiently.

He expected an outburst from Scarlat, but the latter smiled at him in a friendly way:

"You cannot understand yet, you cannot... I am glad you have come, because I shall initiate you, Andrei! The transcedental, don't forget!"

"What is new in the village?" asked Andrei to change the subject.

"In the village?" Father Scarlat enjoyed talking scandal. "Nothing at all! We play cards but the young priest is a cheat. I caught him the day before yesterday taking a knave out of his sleeve and hit him one over the head with the soda-water bottle. He has been here this morning. We made it up. His head is bandaged, but it does not really matter... The notary public's wife is an honest woman since the schoolmasters have gone to the front; her daughter is growing and is waiting to 'raise up seed'," he added sarcastically, as he usually did when quoting scripture. "As for me, for service at the front, I think I've been awarded the order of the Star of Rumania. I'm not quite sure yet. Thank God I'm out of it."

Andrei rose.

"I must go now. You know how it is when you come to a village: you go round and call on everybody."

"I know," Scarlat said shortly, pulling up his trousers which were falling down the whole time.

"Don't forget the number of the beast: 666, it's very important! Meditate!"

Andrei hastened to get away. Laboș, who was sitting on the bench before the house, stopped him:

"Dear me, Andrei," he said to him (they were a sort of distant relations), "what on earth can you get to talk about with him? Now he's scattered what brains he had left. He is driving me to an untimely grave. I have no more peace and quiet. He keeps his chamber-pot right in the middle of the room, says he is afraid to go out, because there are partisans about — whoever those may be, may God strike them dead! The whole house stinks like a privy. He's even left off washing, but as for food he gorges himself like a pig. I'm paying for bitter sins: couldn't the devil have taken him there in' Sinistria.*' Talk to him whenever you can, maybe you'll bring him back to his senses. Now he's sending me out to buy him a gun; he's set on having one." Laboș crossed himself. "If it goes on like that for a year, I'm done for."

"What else is new in the village," Andrei asked him.

"There's nothing new, only the same old worries. People don't get on with one another. The devil's got into them, that's what I think. We've got three priests in the village, and they hate one another like poison; they'd gladly cut each other's throats... And the ploughmen are doing very badly. What are people saying in town? If the war would only come to an end soon, for we can't stand it much longer."

"It'll come to an end, don't you worry," said Andrei leaving him.

He walked about the village all day long — along the dusty streets, climbed up the hill to where one could see the steppe in the distance. But except for some familiar places to which his memories were attached, everything

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* A play on the word Transnistria (see note page 124).

looked new to him, and ugly in the pitiless light of the sun; the houses small, with the paint peeling off the walls, the fences rotten, the people poor and overladen with cares.

That same evening, Andrei and Dan took a book each and began to read. But to Andrei the lines were dancing before his eyes. He threw the little volume away nervously and turned round to Dan who was methodically turning over one page after the other. Vexed, as if this calm were concealing a certain wisdom that escaped him, Andrei rose, took several steps, then sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I say, Dan. What do you expect from life?" His cousin shut his book, took off his spectacles, coughed and looked at him inquisitively:

"What a question! Do you want us to talk?"

He opened the sideboard, produced a bottle of cherry-brandy and said laughing:

"This is going to help us a lot..." He drank and handed Andrei the bottle cheerfully. "How strange we are the two of us, cousin... We've spent our childhood together and... Well!" He cleared his throat. "You know I'm not talkative. Still... No matter what should happen, you can rely on me... By those words I mean to say that you're not alone and that's that! Have a drink!"

Andrei was moved. He reached out his hand laying it on the other's head.

"We shan't perish," he said involuntarily.

"I dont' care. Things will shape somehow. You see, there are certain mathematical axioms... but I can't express what I want to..."

"I believe I understand," said Andrei frowning. "But is life mathematics? And are solutions so easy? A + B + C?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I'm no prophet."

Andrei was thinking slowly, as if he were mentally weighing his sentence: "The feeling of groping... a drowning man seeking for a coil of rope... False preoccupations... False? I don't know. Onc's own, in any case. You cannot say: 'I must not think like this any more,' as if you turned off a tap."

"As a matter of fact, what do you want?" Dan asked him.

Andrei took a gulp, and the strong brandy went to his head. He looked Dan in the eyes:

"Wouldn't you like to understand this world, to create something, not to live as you do, from day to day?"

"Nonsense... Of course I'd like to. But, for the present, what do I know? To solve the problems set for my examination-papers; to say correctly: *Dans son oeuvre capitale*, Le Cid, *Pierre Corneille*... Which is saying nothing. Apart from this, I've read some six hundred books. Don't you think it is dishonest to want to achieve big things when you know so little?"

"Well..." Andrei stared at him with bulging eyes. He had never heard words so full of common sense.

Dan was delighted and went on:

"I just loathe people who think they are the salt of the earth. For instance, in our form a lot of chaps want to be engineers. They dream of themselves as being inventors like Newton, or Edison, but are unable to solve an integral. This world is too full of such individuals. You see, I like to work, to..."

Andrei got up and hugged him:

"You're a genius, cousin. I've just discovered you. I thank you."

"Nothing to thank me for," said Dan grandly. "Do you know what we shall do? Let's take the bottle, get out through the window into the little garden, and sing. Shall we?"

"Done!"

They put the lamp out, and slipped out through the window, careful not to make any noise; they sat down on the bench under the lilac bush and began to sing out of tune:

With all sails spread
At sunset in our boat...

After that they both got drunk, slipped in again through the window and immediately fell asleep. In the morning Emilia did not wake them up. 'They are tired, poor darlings,' she thought rather moved.

About ten o 'clock grannie came in on tiptoe and shook Andrei's shoulder.

"Get up, dear, your cousin Mitru has come, the nephew of your grand-dad, may God rest his soul! He says he wants to ask your advice."

One could see, grannie was very proud.

Andrei dressed quickly glad to meet Mitru Moţ, his cousin twice removed, who was a good friend of his. Some nine years older than Andrei, he had complied with all his whims when he was a child; he had led him about the forest after young bucks, they had both dressed up as "ghosts" to scare the old wives and the young girls in the village. Since Andrei had left for high school, Mitru had become very shy. He was married now and had a child about six years old.

When he saw him, Andrei was stunned. Mitru had grown terribly old. His unshaven hollow cheeks were earthen. His hair, not cut for a long time, was falling in wisps down the crumpled collar of his hemp shirt. Only his small shining eyes moved round and round, like a squirrel's. On seeing Andrei, he sketched a gesture of getting up, whereupon — as he knew it was proper — he asked about his health, his parents and school.

"What's wrong, Mitru?" Andrei asked.

Mitru sighed. He spat, then wiped the spittle away carefully with the heel of his boot.

"Many things are wrong," he said shaking his head sullenly. 'He speaks as old people do,' thought Andrei. And he tried to see again in those faded features the ruddy face of the jolly lad he had been before.

"And what, for instance?"

"Poverty..."

It was as if he couldn't bring himself to speak.

He took out a package of tobacco, tore off a small scrap of paper from a newspaper gone yellow, rolled a cigarette, puffed several times, then coughed as if he were choking.

"They're set on running me down," he said gnashing his teeth.

"Who, Mitru?"

"Well, the bigwigs: the notary, the mayor, the tax-collector, the catch-pole — all of them. I'm like a straw in their eye..."

"Why's that?"

"Because I don't kiss their behinds. That's why." Then calming down he came towards Andrei: "I came to ask you for a piece of advice; you've learnt a lot, you know the law... I was no end glad when I learnt you'd come. For you, Mister Andrei..."

"You never used to call me mister," said Andrei smiling uneasily.

"Mitru knows to speak as it's becoming," the grandmother's dry voice was heard from near the oven.

"Tell me, Mitru."

"Well, here's how it was. About a year ago Florița and myself worked for Cloambeș. He paid us. I'd commit a sin if I lied; Cloambeș or Lădoi, as people have nicknamed him, did pay us. One day, I had gone to town. When I returned, I found my woman crying. 'I won't go back to Lădoi, she said.' 'Why?' I asked. She kept silent. 'Why won't you go, woman?' I shouted, for I was a bit fuddled. I raised my hand. 'Why are you simpering like that — fussing like a young lady?' At last I got out of her that Lădoi had wanted to dishonour her in the stables. Then my hair stood on end. I betook myself to him. It was a Saturday evening... no, it was, Friday, I called him out into the yard and, when I boxed his ears once or twice, he fell down flat. He tried to get up and I hit him again. The blood was trickling out of his nose. He was calling for Ioșca, his son. 'Call him,' I said, 'call him and I'll squash him flat too, you sons of a bitch, you shameless swine!' Ioșca didn't interfere. That's all there was."

"But you too, Mitru, are too rash," the old woman spoke again.

"But what was I to do, Mother Ana? Those Cloambeș people have neither shame nor decency."

"That's true."

"How could I let things be? Does he think that if he's the boss he can do... No-o-o!... by God!" He turned round to Andrei: "They've sued me for coming to their house drunk and wanting to kill them. I've been fined five thousand lei. Oh Lord! where am I to get all that money?"

"Come along with me," Andrei said jumping up to his feet. "Come."

He walked out in a hurry. Mitru followed him. They went out of the yard, then Andrei stopped.

"Look here, Mitru, I'll give you the five thousand," he said in a breath. "But don't tell anybody. Do you hear me ?"

Mitru looked at him suspiciously.

"Perhaps you're in a hurry to get rid of me," he said reproachfully. "Better say so straight out. I came to you only for advice. You're educated, you must know the laws."

"I don't know any laws!" Andrei shouted. "Don't be a child. Wait two or three days and I'll give you the money."

He felt like laughing. The baron's money... He had forgotten about it; now he felt a kind of relief, as if he had taken a load off his chest.

"In two days you'll have it," he said solemnly.

"Do you really mean it ?" stammered Mitru and his small burning eyes began to swim in a mist of tears, "May God.." he whispered with pale lips. "Master Andrei..."

"Call me Andrei! What the devil, aren't we second cousins ?"

"Andrei...How can I... Do not worry!" he burst out. "I shall work, I'll move heaven and earth and give it back to you . As soon as possible..."

"Dont' trouble! Only listen well to what I tell you: don't you let out a word to anyone."

Mitru smiled sadly like a man with much experience.

"How could you think that..." Then suspiciously: "But where did you get so much money from ? Have you got a job ?"

"What do you care? I didn't steal it, you needn't be afraid"

"Don't be angry with me... but five thousand lei... is a lot of money. In all my life I..." He buried his face in his hands: "Jesus, you certainly are up there in heaven... And how I have cursed this month..." He turned to Andrei: "There is something else... I sowed tobacco on a bit of land. The two little acres I have, I sowed tobacco on them. That's why I haven't been to the war either...You know that those who grow tobacco, haven't been called up."

"Well, but then — laughed Andrei — the whole village ought to have..."

"Oh no, the bigwigs are no fools. Only those who've grown it since 1940 haven't been taken. D'you get it? Well then, after they'd sued me and I'd lost my case, what happened? I went to Lădoi... may God curse him, and I went down on my knees, as in front of an icon, and begged him to forgive me." At the thought of this, Mitru's face darkened. "I begged him as one begs God, and he kept rubbing the spot where I'd broken his head. He kept on saying that he too needed money, that times were hard, that he bore me no ill-will, but was surprised that I could have listened to the words of a silly woman like Floriţa. That day I beat her up, poor thing, until I almost killed her. Lădoi said he couldn't do more for me than give me a delay of seven days. I went round to everybody, to the priest, to Laboş, I entreated them. Not one of them gave me the money..." Mitru sighed. "That's that. Not one of them can stand me. They say in the village that I am a Bolshy because I can't bear injustice. Once I wanted to kill Laboş for the same sort of thing. So now he didn't give me a single leu. After five days Lădoi sent me word that on the morrow he would send the executory officer to drive me out of the house... I went again... My God, I can't tell you what humiliation I swallowed. Will the time ever come for me to hang them all on as many trees as there are in Lunca! I wanted to drive a knife into him, but I remembered my baby and Floriţa. Better if God had taken both of them! and I should have become a robber.I went away like drunk. In the evening he came with Gociman, the gendarmerie sergeant-major. We were all of us — I, Floriţa, Fănel — gathered round him in the enclosure, entreating him. He merely laughed, damn him. Then he called me aside and told me that, if I made over to him the land planted with baccy weed, he'd let me off. I wouldn't even hear of it. That's what has saved me so far, and there's only two men in the village who haven't been to the war: myself and the precentor. He said that if I refused... What was I to do? I made it over to him until I should pay off my debt; two acres, five thousand and the interest! 'Rather cheap,' said Cloambeş turning up his nose. 'I'm not a fiend. Listen what we'll do, Mitru: I'll give you my acre down in Grinduri, where I've sown corn. Will that do?' 'Alright,"

I said, 'but only till I manage to find money.' They left. Since then I've been going about like a madman."

"Don't worry, in two days you'll have the money. And now tell me..."

"What else shall I tell?" Mitru frowned. "There isn't much to tell... We're as usual... They say that, if the war comes to an end, everything will be different."

"In what way?"

"How can I tell? That's what some people say. That now they are beating the Germans, beating and crushing them." He returned to his worries: "I think that's why Cloambeș was after my land, to get his son, Ioșca, exempted from going to the front. There's so much evil-doing in this village that I wonder how we can stand it. Well, I'll be going... Thank you..."

Andrei stood in the street, staring after him. He felt very calm, almost glad. 'What is the use of measuring the earth with a pair of compasses when you can help a man, sometimes?'

He went into the house and wrote to Lucian. He asked him to go to their house, look in the Grigorescu album and send him the money he would find there.

Mitru walked in the street like dazed. He prayed: 'If it only were true...' In front of Lădoi's house he stopped, knocked at the gate and, as nobody answered his knock, he picked up a stone from the ground and beganto knock and to shout until someone opened the gate and Ioșca peered out.

"What d'ye want?"

"Where is your father?"

"He's busy."

"Where's your father?" Mitru shouted, his eyes bulging out of his head.

"Coming, coming," Cloambeș's placid voice could be heard.

He came out into the street. He was wearing a very white shirt, embroidered round the neck and the sleeves. His little round black hat pushed backwards showed the top of his head, bald as an egg.

"What is it you wish?"

"Well, I've come to tell you that on Saturday you'll get your money. Give me my landed-property paper."

"Hear, hear!" Cloambeș said, amazed. "But how did you get hold of the money?"

"That's my business. Give me my paper."

"Just so, on your word? Is that some new way of yours?" Lădoi smacked his thin yellowish lips, over which fell threads of his yellow moustache, few and far-between. "Or do you take me for a lunatic?"

"You don't believe I'll give you the money?" Mitru flared up, but Cloambeș took a step backwards, shut the door in his face and called back to him from the other side:

"You'll end in jail!"

Mitru went away grumbling. Cloambeș turned round and looked at his son. The latter was as white as chalk and breathing heavily.

"Serves you right, you damned fool, for you never wanted to go to high school and become somebody!" Cloambeș yelled. "Now it's no use staring at me, you ass!"

His wife, Aurelia came out into the porch and, hearing the last words, put her hand to her mouth and began to wail:

"Oh me, deary me, I've had but one chi-i-i-ild and they're sending him to the fro-o-ont!"

"Be quiet, woman!" Cloambeș bawled at her, "or I'll stick the iron pitchfork into you. You and your milksop of a son!"

"Daddy," said Ioșca very meekly, "all my trust is in you... You're such a clever man!"

"I am, lad, I am!" Cloambeș stuck out his chest. "Don't be afraid, Ioșca, I've spoken to the mayor. He sent round the news to the recruiting office, that you've sown tobacco; he added a copy of the deed, don't you worry... Only you are not to disobey me from now on or I'll make mince-meat of the two of you!"

He walked on along the brick footpath which wound its way through the wide enclosure, passed by the stables, made a wry face and swore at Marcu, the servant; he went into the yard to see how much was left of the hayrick, took a pitchfork and prodded the hay to see if the spring rains had not soaked it through, then he asked for water to wash himself and, putting on his black suit, went

towards the mayor's office. The mayor Sofron was a friend of his, although they used to hate one another. Sofron sided with the Liberals, while he sided with Maniu, and they took turns in being mayor. They made it up when the legionaries came into power, and made Teodosie Dumbravă mayor. He was a scoundrel, a stranger from the old kingdom, and owned a maize-flour mill. After the "rebellion"* Teodosie was sent away, and the village elected Sofron as mayor; they liked him better because he was tall, had white hair, a black moustache and wore round his waist a three-coloured sash like the national flag. He shook hands with everybody and was not stuck up with Lădoi.

"Your servant, Mr. Meliuță and Mr. Sofron," smiled Lădoi coming in and touching with his forefinger the narrow brim of his black hat.

The notary public Meliuță was trying hard to clear up some bills and didn't succeed, for he was thinking of the small bottle of rye brandy which he had not yet drunk that day.

"Brother Sofron, I'd like a word with you. I hope the notary won't mind."

"In what particular question?" Sofron gave himself airs, pushing his spectacles up to his forehead.

"It's about my worries," Cloambeș sighed.

"Oh, well, you needn't, everything has been done properly. Mr. Meliuță, where are Cloambeș's property deeds?"

"Here, they are alright." The notary public hastened to look through a heap of papers lying about on the table. "The sales deed for the land in Teuzaș, from Mitru Moț to Alexandru Cloambeș, and the transfer deed for the piece of ground in Grinduri, from Alexandru Cloambeș to Mitru Moț. Here they are!" and he handed them the papers.

"What date did you put?" the mayor inquired.

"Well," Meliuță said uneasily, "as we agreed — December 1942. As long as it doesn't..." He scratched his head with apprehension. "But the question is... is... do I get anything out of it?"

"Good gracious, Mr. Meliuță, we're old acquaintances, aren't we?"

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* see note page 24

"Ah," sighed Meliuţă and so as not to hinder them, he pulled the big register out of the drawer, passed his pen through his hair and plunged into the columns of figures.

Cloambeş whispered into Sofron's ear:

"The pauper says he's found some money. God only knows where from."

"Well, and what of it?" Sofron grimaced reassuringly. "He sold you the land, didn't he? He did. He owed you five thousand lei. The acre you gave him in Grinduri is worth at least eight thousand. Those little acres of his are worth thirteen notes. It's even too much..."

"Did he sign the deeds?"

"He did. Mr. Meliuţă dated them afterwards in the same ink. Don't you worry, old chap, only give the notary something to keep his mouth shut."

"How much?"

"Some five, six hundred. It'll be enough for him."

"I'll give him a thousand. I won't be stingy. I've one son only, I'm not going to let him go to the front just when the war is coming to an end."

Sofron winked to signify that he agreed, then sat down at the table. Cloambeş took a thousand lei note out of his pocket, folded it up very small, pulled up a chair and sat down near Meliuţă.

"What are you writing, Mr. Meliuţă?"

"Nothing, nothing," Meliuţă said, flustered. "Just rubbish..."

"Well, I thank you very much, from all my heart," Cloambeş whispered and slipped the note into his hand. "May God grant you luck, to see your young lady married. And may we dance again at the christening too."

Meliuţă fingered the paper in his pocket happily. "Maybe it is even five hundred," he was thinking. He didn't take any further notice of the two, but producing a copybook from under a register started writing in it.

On the third day, as he had expected, Andrei received the album in which the money was concealed and a letter from Lucian.

Dear Andrei,

As you see, I have done what you asked me, although it seems to me rather strange and makes me uneasy. I have been anxiously looking forward to hearing from you, but your lines were so impersonal and hasty. There was nothing I could do, but get angry or find an explanation. I believe I've found it. It is a lame one, but I have to be content with it: you' re probably busy.

I live, as before, in a voluntary seclusion and I feel bored to death. Were it not for social convetions whose humble slave you know I am, I would take the train and come to you. Y think there would be a bed and a piece of bread for me too. But never fear! I could not do a think like that.

As for the latest news as far (as one may write about them of course) here is plenty of them. At home, the whole house is topsyturvy on account of the great preparations for our departure. We are leaving town. But I'm afraid father will be obliged to stay on at the factory although the whole family is nagging at him desperately. You would not recognize the town, it's grown that beautiful. The trees, the green, the sun all seem to reproach us for our uneasiness, so petty yet seemingly essential. At home every night there are endless discussions. The family council thrashing out heatedly all kinds of problems, food, clothes and the like. In the meantime I sit in my little room listening to the moving strains of the Vth and IXth Symphonies, my old passions. I regret that you are not present too, and I am aware of the feeling of your devastating nothingness with which, volens nolens, *I'll have to get used because I am rapidly nearing what is called* l'âge de raison. *If I'd talk to my people about my plans, I think they would expell me from the clan. With us practical professions are the fashion, so that you are likely to see me measuring roads, building up massive bridges or rummaging in the bowels of some poor mortal.*

Forgive me if I am boring you, but these problems are very important to me, although, I try to make fun of them when writing.

There would be other news, but . . .

Vîslan is at our house the whole time and complains that he is at a loss for topics for his articles. Only P. of Z. preserves his Olympian serenity. To me it gives the impression of hiding a boundless stupidity. What do you think? Do you find any reason for optimism? I rather doubt it. Hobbling along, I have got near to what we called your imponderable. Oh, don't let me forget, Suslănescu came to see me, in a shocking state. Dirty, his shoes without laces, his tie askew; he was smelling of cheap plum-brandy and of herring. He flung himself into an arm-chair and started complaining incoherently, so that I had to listen again to the old leit-motif. *After that he began talking about you and was loud in his praises of you. He compared you to the shrewd Ulysses, to Zola. ('Andrei's paper,' he said, 'is a* J'accuse *of our times.') He rolled eyes all the time, as though he were bewildered. Talking of Suslă-nescu reminds me that Teddie treated me to a priceless anecdote. It seems that lately Mme Suslănescu* mère, a *ridiculous specimen of a boyar's lady in her dotage, came to pay her son a visit. She stayed for several days, after which Suslănescu saw her off. At the station, I don't know how (Teddie hasn't the gift of characteristic details) they got separated by a goods-train. Mme Suslănescu called* éperdue: Mon fils!! Où êtes-vous, mon fils?' *at which Suslănescu gave a final yell:* 'J'y suis madame ma mère, J'y suis!'

"*Drăgan has bought himself through the C.N.R.*" *) *I think, a Louis XV drawing-room, and when in company speaks of nothing else but* 'ses meubles'. *The rest of the people lead their usual apalling life. I must close now. Write to me, write to me! I am epic, owing to compul-sory official restrictions; you be philosophic in Rousseau's style.*

Yours affectionately
Lucian

Andrei took the money and crushed it in his fist. He experienced once again the shame and humiliation of

[1]) C.N.R., the Rumanization office that administered the property of the Jewish population that had been dispossessed of its houses in accordance with thè then prevalent anti-semitic laws.

that night and, snatching Lucian's letter, tore it to pieces. He told his grannie that he had some business with Father Scarlat, and went out into the yard washed clean by the night's rain. The leaves of the plum-trees looked all the better for the rain and shone like emeralds, and the air was pure; the dust had disappeared, leaving a thin brown crust instead, on which the sandals left their traces.

Mitru did not live very far off. To get to his house, Andrei had to walk round the pond swollen by now. The very moment he opened the gate, he was struck by Floriţa's wailing. He stopped terrified. The dog, who had forgotten him, barked with all his might, tugging at his chain.

"Who's there?" came Mitru's hoarse voice.

"It's me, Andrei... I've come with..."

Mitru appeared in the porch. His face was as white as chalk, and he was walking unsteadily.

"Come into the house," he whispered.

The small room had a smoky ceiling. On the bed sat the village carpenter, Tulea, Floriţa's brother, holding her by the shoulder with one hand, and with the other stroking his thick moustache. He mumbled finding nothing else to say:

"Floriţa, now then, Floriţa..."

"What are we going to do? What are we going to do now?" she groaned biting her thin lips.

She didn't take any notice of Andrei, but jumped up and began to hit her belly with her fist:

"It's only you who... Only you..."

"Woman!" Mitru screamed rushing to her and taking hold of her hand. "Woman, for Heaven's sake..."

She calmed down instantly, let herself drop with her breast on the table and began to sob.

Mitru went to the table silently, took up a green paper and handed it to Andrei. The latter read in amazement: "Mobilization Order. Regiment..."

"They've done me in," said Mitru through his teeth and stamping his feet. "They've done me in." His face had become rigid. "Now I'll go to the wood-shed, take out my big axe, go and split their heads. There's nothing else left for me to do!"

"Mitru, Mitru lad!" Tulea shook his head scared. "Think of the babies, lad, of the woman... Don't take leave of your senses!"

"Did they think of my babies?" Mitru flew at him and caught him by the chest. "Did they think of my wife?"

Andrei stood dumbfounded in the middle of the room. Then he came up to Mitru and whispered to him:

"Mitru... I've brought you the money."

Mitru looked at him absently. He opened his mouth; his lips trembled, then he bit them until the blood came.

"It's too late now... Look... the order... In three days I must be at the regiment. That's tomorrow. They've kept it back a day, damn their souls!"

Andrei was crumpling the notes in his pocket. An idea occurred to him:

"Listen, Mitru, I think you'd better go to them, all the same. The mayor could let the regiment know immediately that you are not liable to be mobilized. Go to Lădoi's and take your sales deed. Don't give in, man, what the devil..."

For a moment Mitru struggled with despair, then snatching his hat up, he rushed out of the room, followed by Andrei. In the courtyard, the latter handed him the bunch of notes. Mitru took them, counted them, then looked at him with moist eyes:

"If...if... I manage... — he whispered — then..."

Go on, never mind, don't lose any more time."

Mitru raced as if fire were at his heels. As the gate of Lădoi's house stood open, he dashed in. He caught sight of Aurelia and asked her abruptly:

"Where's Uncle Cloambeş?"

"I don't know," she piped.

She feared Moţ like the devil; her husband had told her repeatedly that he was capable of killing them and setting fire to their house.

"Where is he? How can you say you don't know?"

"At the mayor's office... I think..."

Mitru started for the gate but, before going out, turned round:

"Listen, Aurelia: I've known you for ages. I'll pay you back everything, down to the last farthing, you can be sure of that."

The way to the mayor's office seemed to him long, so that he started running. He didn't answer several questions which were thrown to him.

"Where are you running to like that?"

"What's the matter, man?"

It was only in the courtyard of the mayor's office that he stopped to recover his breath. Cloambeş came after a quarter of an hour and looked at him in surprise, pushing his hat back from his forehead.

"Whatever's the matter with you, Mitru? Have you again been fighting with somebody?"

"I've brought you the money!" Mitru shouted waving the notes above his head. "Here it is, all of it."

"Well, well," Cloambeş began to laugh in a friendly way. "Were you afraid I wouldn't wait for you?"

"Here's the money," Mitru shrieked in a frenzy. "Give me the deed!"

"What deed are you talking about?" Cloambeş turned red in the face. "What deed do you need?"

"Take the money!" Mitru held out the thousands to him. "Take the money I tell you!"

"Steady man, what the devil's the matter with you? You've brought me the money; all right. But where did you get it from?" he asked inquisitively. "Five thousand in these times are no child's play. I see people trust you..."

"Lădoi, take the money!" growled Mitru taking a step towards him. "Take the money and let's go into the office and get things right."

"I don't know what you want to get right," said Cloambeş quietly, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets.

"To get things as they used to be."

Mitru was doing his utmost to speak calmly.

"But aren't they right as they are? I gave you an acre on a hillock, first-class soil, and let you off for the five thousand. You gave me two poor acres. The matter is settled!"

"Give me those acres back! Let's settle the matter quietly."

"That ground is mine, now." Lădoi raised his voice. "I'm not selling it. I need it."

"What?" yelled Mitru without moving an inch.

"So that my advice is... don't run into debt. Take the money back where you got it from and..."

He didn't finish. With a leap, Mitru was at him and knocked him down and began to throttle him.

"I'll kill you!"

Lădoi made a choking sound and scratched Mitru's short thick fingers.

The door of the mayor's office opened and Meliuță appeared. He shouted shrilly:

"Help! Sofron, Gociman!"

The men dashed out of the office and separated them. Lădoi, his eyes suffused with blood, was feeling his throat and spitting, whilst Mitru was struggling to free himself from the hands that had gripped him.

The mayor put on his spectacles, coughed, scratched the top of his head, then covered it up with his round town-made hat.

"Moț, you seem to be mad. Do you want us to hand you over to the gendarmes to carry you off in chains?"

"He must give me back my land; I've brought him the money! Look... here it is!" he said trying to shake himself free, "good money, full five thousand... I've brought it!"

The mayor turned round to Lădoi, with a questioning look.

"What does he want?" Then to Mitru. "Aren't you drunk, man?"

"No, Mr. Sofron," Moț answered in a subdued tone, "I'm not drunk."

"He wants me *to sell* him *my* piece of ground in Teuzaș!" Lădoi laid a stress on the words. "And when I said I wouldn't, he flew at me and was about to kill me."

"You're not quite right in the head, Moț." The mayor was angry now. "Leave him alone," he said to the men. "Go home and lie down."

"He must give me my piece of ground back!" yelled Mitru in a frenzy. "And you, Sofron, why are you playing the fool?"

"Wait, wait," cut in Meliuţă, "what is it you want, Moţ? You sold the piece of ground, you got instead of it one acre on a hillock and five thousand."

"I've told him so, Mr. Meliuţă, but he won't understand."

"Enough of that," said the mayor turning round. "Go home!"

"I won't go, I won't go! D'you hear me? I won't go! Blast you, you swine! I won't go!"

"What's all this going on here?" a hoarse voice was heard, and all of them turned towards the mayor's office. In the doorway, bandy-legged, stood Gociman, the gendarmerie sergeant-major, the collar of his tunic open and his greasy cap pulled down on his eyebrows.

"Go home, damn you!" he said mildly. "Go, before I..."

The mayor, Meliuţă, Lădoi, Gociman and the other men went back into the office.

Mitru took several steps forward, then backward as if he had been performing a dance; he went and leaned against the white-washed brick wall on which the lads who had come about business had written obscene things. He felt the moisture of the wall on his burning forehead. After a while he turned towards the office and, raising his fist, cursed:

"May God damn the whole lot of you!"

But this did not relieve him. He would have liked to be powerful enough to hang them all, to tear them to pieces, and he was not. He staggered out and, through the haze that dimmed his eyes, saw like a smoke the greenish line of the forest. When he was a youngster and tended the horses... the other boys sometimes kindled a fire... or waited to see a pure maiden rise out of the rustling darkness ...or the Dragon...

He went towards the school. Andrei, who was reading in the little garden, saw him approach, feeling his way with his bare feet. His face was like a mask, with hardened features on which his bristly beard put a dark shadow. He came up to Andrei, fumbled in his pockets and held out to him the money sticky with sweat.

"There you are. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"But what's happened?"

"Nothing," said Mitru letting himself sink down on the grass. "Nothing's happened. He doesn't want to..."

"Oh, hell!" cried Andrei. "But what country do they think we live in? King Log's?"

"The country's all right, it's only the laws that are wrong."

"That's what we'll see. Wait for me here!"

"What do you intend to do?"

"I'm going to the mayor's office."

He ran there and went in without stopping to think what he was doing. When he opened the door, he heard the mayor's thick laugh and the obsequious piping of Meliuţă.

"When did you come, Andrei?"

He turned round. The one who had addressed him was Ardeleanu, the village mechanic, a tall man about thirty-seven, with brown curly hair and pale blue eyes. He wore a cheap ready-made suit and large military boots.

"Yesterday," Andrei said in a hurry. "Yesterday or the day before."

"What's new about town?"

Andrei who thought of answering absently 'all's well,' was silent for a moment, then said:

"The happy merchants are thriving..." and laughed sadly.

Ardeleanu handed him a package of cigarettes. They stood side by side, smoking silently.

From what Andrei had heard, Ardeleanu was a queer fellow. He had come to the village about three years before. He had gone to the mayor's office and shown them a paper stating he had been demobilized on account of his bad health. For some time sergeant-major Gociman had behaved quite respectfully towards him. He was convinced Ardeleanu was a secret-police inspector sent by Antonescu to hear and see everything. This impression was strenghtened by the mechanic's manner. He was always alone and carried a folded book in his coat pocket; he seemed clever and, when one talked to him, one realized he had travelled about. The peasants were surprised to see he went neither to the pub nor to church. He often came to the school-teacher with whom he played endless games of chess.

There was a small mill that ground maize in the village, which had belonged to Teodosie Dumbravă, a rich man and a legionary; after the rebellion he had been taken to a concentration camp at Tîrgu-Jiu. Baron Papp of Zerind had bought the mill dirt-cheap and sent a manager, Pintea. The latter had found lodgings and a mistress in the nearest town, whence he only came once a week, mortal drunk, had a look at the books and went to sleep at Cloambeș's or at the mayor's, so that Ardeleanu was the master of the mill.

Many people began to wonder at the way he behaved. He took only a small percentage of flour from widows or from the wives of those who were at the front; for them he would put down in his books smaller quantities of grain than they actually had. Of course those things were heard in the village, and Gociman began to feel suspicious. Once he came in the dead of night and asked for his papers. They were all in order. Several days later Pintea took Gociman to task for having found fault with the mechanic. The baron was pleased. It was so difficult in these times to find a clever man! Gociman was fuming inwardly. He had to consider himself beaten. Andrei had heard his uncle talk about the mechanic. He appreciated him greatly, especially for his thirst for knowledge.

"Got some business here?" Ardeleanu asked.

"Yes, I want to talk to the mayor. Haven't you heard what happened to Mitru Moț?"

Ardeleanu nodded and looked at him with curiosity.

"And what do you mean to do about it?"

"But these disgraceful things can't go on like that. If you don't mind waiting for me..."

He opened the door and entered the office. Sofron the mayor, who prided himself on knowing how to behave towards gentlemen, jumped to his feet and came to shake hands with him.

"So, you've come, Master Andrei!" He smiled broadly, stroking his turned-up moustache.

As usual he was dressed in his Sunday best and was bursting with health. Meliuță the notary, a small man with the face of a little monkey, half covered by his huge,

tortoise-shell rimmed spectacles, fidgeted on his chair, grimacing in a friendly manner:

"Have you come to lend a hand to our headmistress? Poor thing! How hard she works! We are well pleased with her."

Had the mayor not entered into the conversation, Andrei would have been at a loss how to begin. But his solicitude enraged him.

"D'you think there are no laws in this country, sir?" he asked in a shrill voice.

Meliuţă dropped his pen and the mayor gaped.

"Why... Master Andrei... what do you mean?"

"You're sending Mitru Moţ to the front, so as to spare Cloambeş's son?" The mayor was bewildered.

"Well, but... Master Andrei... I've known you since you were quite small."

"What's that got to do with it? What you've done is most arbitrary."

"Now that will do!" Sofron lost his temper and grew scarlet. "What a pity you've so much schooling! How can you repeat such idle talk?... Well, now... — he shouted — be so good, Master Andrei, and leave this office. Fancy a pup like you to come and shame me, an old man. And a mayor at that. Don't take it in evil part, but don't you ever dare set foot here again."

"We'll see about that", said Andrei burning red in the face. "Don't you believe that..."

"Get out, will you!" shrieked Sofron and, after Andrei went out, he banged the door vigorously after him.

Andrei found himself in front of Ardeleanu who, of course, had heard everything. He felt ashamed and wanted to get away — although he didn't know how to manage it. The mechanic came up to him and squeezed his hand, but Andrei avoided his gaze.

"Let's go," Ardeleanu said gently. "That's what it is, nothing but arbitrariness..."

They walked side by side along the dusty road. Andrei heard the other man laugh. He looked round, surprised and somewhat hurt.

"What did you hope for? Did you expect them to do something? They?"

"I thought that I hadn't the right to keep silent... Oh, if people only..."

"Which people, Andrei?"

"All honest-minded people. One often feels like howling, or like hitting out with an axe..."

"Whom?"

"Just right and left... At random..."

Mitru was still in the garden, waiting for him. When he looked at Andrei's face he understood. He came towards him, bent down and picked up a clump of damp earth.

"Do you see? That's what we are in their hands, soft clay. They do as they please. They have the law behind them, and then they have gendarmes and all sort of power. If you hit them on the head with an axe, they send you to gaol for the rest of your life." He sighed. "So now I'll go to the front... While Cloambeş Ioşca, an able-bodied lad, will stay at home and... our women! That's what drives me crazy."

At that moment Andrei had an idea. He took Mitru by the hand and pulled him into the school common-room.

"Sit down," he said to him. "Sit down a moment. Ioşca won't stay at home. Do you know what regiment he belongs to?"

"I do: the same as mine, the 23rd Infantry Regiment."

"Wait a moment."

Andrei took a sheet of paper and wrote hurriedly:

To the Recruiting Office

The undersigned Iosif Cloambeş, of Lunca, contingent 1939, belonging to the 23rd infantry regiment, while Our Country Rumania is at War against the Enemy, I have thought that it is not Right for a Young Man in the prime of life to stay at Home because he has planted tobacco.

So that I ask you to be a Volunteer to defend my Country against the Enemies which want to invade us. I am impatiently awaiting the moment to do my Duty towards Marshal Antonescu and Rumania which the Bolshevic enemy wants to invade. I, the undersigned, therefore ask to be called to my regiment.

Iosif Cloambeş
private
23rd Infantry Reg.

"Look at that, Mitru," he said handing him the sheet. "What do you think of it?"

Mitru read, rubbing his nose with astonishment. When he came to the end, he began to laugh:

"That will do him all right! See what education means! You can always find a way out, Andrei..."

"Post it in town, not here..."

Seeing Mitru's face darken, he tried to soothe him.

"Don't worry, Mitru. Perhaps you won't even get as far as the front. One of these days the Russians will break through at Jassy."

Mitru looked at him for a long time silently, then said:

"And even if I do get there... As soon as I can, I'll lift my arms up, and everything will be over. The Russians are decent people, mark my word. In vain have they tried to stuff our heads, saying that the Russians would cut off our ears and noses. Mere words... As soon as I can, I'll surrender... Others have done it, many of them. Let me tell you something: with the Russians things are different from what they are with us. Quite different..." He bent towards him: "Just go and talk to Ardeleanu, the mechanic ...I can tell you, because you are one of us. He knows lots of things and... Well then, good luck, and see you again soon."

He rummaged in his pockets and handed him the money.

"There you are. Thank you once more for your kind thought and for the help."

"No!..." Andrei pushed his hand back. "Give it to Floriţa, it will be a help for the moment. I don't need this money myself." And, since he felt the need of an explanation—more for himself than for Mitru — he added: "It reminds me of very sad things. Take it and forget that I ever gave it to you."

Mitru took him in his arms and hugged him until he made his bones crack. Then, without another word, he went away.

But his words lingered on in Andrei's mind.

'True — what do I know about Russia? Just a lot of nonsense: the black police lorry driving about at night, and that bolshevism... What is bolshevism? After the

other war the Russians made a revolution; they killed the Tsar. That's all I know. I know more interesting things about the Assyrio-Chaldeans or the Etruscans. In 1941 everybody was talking about the "giant with clay feet" who would collapse in three weeks' time. They've beaten us, and they go on beating us... And they'll certainly win the war. And then? What will there be, then?'

It had never dawned on Andrei that Meliuță would tell all the village what had taken place at the mayor's office, so that, when Aunt Emilia took him to task, he was quite put out. His aunt had never dared rebuke him or scold him before, but now she said trembling with annoyance:

"Those children are terrible, mother. They cause so much unpleasantness." And she cast a heavy and reproachful glance at Andrei, as though to say: 'And after having been expelled from high school!'

But to Andrei's surprise, grandmother took his defence:

"You did right to tell them so, my child! They are wretches. Alas, there are no more people as there used to be once, who took a hatchet to them. The Sofrons have always been poor stuff. Now what's that woman going to do with a small infant...? And I hear she is with child again..."

"Let us give them something," said Dan, but this didn't enter grandmother's views any more.

Andrei was better aware of the atmosphere created around him when he went with Dan to play cards with priest Joja's son. The priest, a short, bald and fat man, puffed up with pride, hardly answered his greeting: he kept calling Luță away from the table, sending him either to take the mess to the pigs or to chop wood. After a time he couldn't control himself any longer and said to Andrei angrily:

"Fine things they teach you at school, my boy. There's no respect even for white hair."

Andrei couldn't help retorting:

"There are such things as old scoundrels too. To be a scoundrel one must not necessarily be young."

The priest stared at him and thought he would preach about that next Sunday. Truly, people had begun to lose

their common sense and respect... They felt something coming. Yes, but should the Russians get as far as this village... The priest changed his mind about his sermon.

On the way back, Dan said to Andrei:

"People are really disgusting, Andrei."

"Some of them, cousin."

On the following day Mitru's wife was still asleep when he woke up. He stole stealthily out of the warm bed, disconsolate after their hopeless embraces; he dressed and passed into the kitchen. From the little wooden bed next the oven you could hear the child's pure breathing. Gently, on tiptoe, he came near him, feeling his heart oppressed. 'Who'll bring him up if I...' In the dim whitish light the boy seemed to him as pure and white as an icon. He would have liked to kiss him, but he was afraid his hot lips would awaken him. He stroked the rough blanket covering the child gently, his fingers lingered for a time on the small body sunk in sleep. Then he went out into the yard and to the stable, where he began to curry Steala.

"You... good cow... you," he was saying to her caressing her wet muzzle.

The cow turned her head to look at him: the chain which tied her horns clinked merrily. Every step made the straw on the ground rustle, and the muffled noise of the chewing could be beard. Mitru went out into the yard, treading heavily on the damp grass. Inhaling the keen morning air into his chest, he took in with his whole being the village, the roofs, the pale raw sky, the smoke which was rising from some chimneys. A swallow flew past him, almost touching him with its white belly.

"It's going to rain. The swallows are flying low... But who cares? If only I get out of this. I'll pay each according to his due." He clenched his fists until the tips of his fingers became white. 'If I had Lădoi now at arm's length!' he laughed darkly. It was not so much his departure that he minded but Florița's tears. Last night Fănică had asked him:

"Father, why do you want to go to war?"

"My God, do you think I want to go?" he had groaned

"Then why do you go?"

"Because I've got to..."

"I won't die. No, I won't die. But, if it is ordained that I should die, others will be sure to hang them in my place." He looked round, saying good-bye to everything, then he entered the house with small slow steps and, when he came to the bed in which Florița was still sleeping, her hair undone, her fists gathered to her open mouth, he shook her by the shoulders:

"Get up, woman, get up... The time has come for me to go to the holy war..."

*

On the following days Andrei spent almost the whole time shut up in one of the empty classrooms. He could not rid himself of a sensation of powerless ignorance, and this tortured him and made him restless. He walked between the forms, thinking of all sort of nonsense. 'What would have happened if...' and he stopped sullenly. He refused to accept this cheap evasion into what might have been. And more and more did there grow up in him the feeling that all his ideas and knowledge lacked a point of support, some catalytic element round which he could range them. He was thirsting for truth, something worth living for. From the age of fifteen he had dreamt that some day he would be a creator, that he would live fully every moment of his life, so as not to have the feeling of having spent himself uselessly. Those were ideas and longings which he could not keep for himself; that was why he had been so happy enjoying Lucian's friendship. Later on they had drifted apart, and Andrei wondered now if the fault had not been chiefly his own. 'We ought to have accomplished something, instead of discussing heatedly the whole time how to achieve what we were aiming at.' The same as Suslănescu, whose verbal optimism infuriated him and impelled him to answer sarcastically every time the former, contemplating with enraptured gazes a rosy-coloured Arcadia, would recite: "I love life. I love it tremendously. Our spiritual youthfulness, what a wonderful thing it is! To be able to delight in a ray of sunshine, the smile of a young girl... *O temps, suspends ton vol!*" Andrei told himself that all these were but a lever to keep up the will to live of a man who was

a failure. He felt the urge to throw stones at this stupid satisfaction. That is why, at the literary circle where the essays ("Alecsandri, the King of the Rumanian Landscape," "Titu Maiorescu, the Emperor of Rumanian Criticism") were of monumental conceit, everything turning out to be "full of genius," deeper than one would believe," "worthy of "mention," "having incalculable consequences" — Andrei read once a *Manifesto against Priggishness* arousing unanimous indignation. On leaving, Father Potra had said to him with grieved gentleness:

"If it were for me to decide, my dear boy, I would expel you from school. There is a kind of cleverness society does not require."

"Society, that is to say a congregation of half-wits who tolerate each other and lie to one another," Andrei had answered.

"Don't forget, my boy, that you too are a part of it."

The more he thought of it, the less sorry Andrei was about his paper. 'At least I've told them what I thought of them. I showed them that I don't belong to their kin. Even if it didn't mean much.' He remembered Schwartz's words: 'When the war comes to an end by the defeat of the Germans, things will change.' He thought with a kind of impatience: 'If only this would happen sooner! I don't care what will be after that. Only let it be something else, something utterly different.'

Reading one of the books Răducanu had given him, *Castellion against Calvin*, he experienced a tremendous joy. The book was... about a free man who had risen against tyranny, had sacrificed everything — his position, his personal happiness, had thrown into the scales his freedom and his life, to be able to shout the truth to the world. The same as every time he made a discovery, he felt the need to impart it to Lucian, and he started a letter to him which he never finished. It would have been necessary to write out hundreds of pages, or to be together with him and to shout with enthusiasm at every one of his own thoughts he found in the book. While he was reading, somebody knocked at the classroom door. It was Ardeleanu.

"I was just passing by and I thought I'd look in... Mitru has gone to the front..."

"Yes..."

"D'you know why I've come? Let's have a look at the map and see how things are going on in politics."

They spread a ragged map out over the blackboard. Ardeleanu looked for several towns, then, turning round to Andrei, asked him:

"I say, is what I've heard true? Have you been expelled from school?"

"Yes!" answered Andrei looking up.

"Luţu, the priest's son, told me about it. Would you mind telling me why?"

Andrei gazed at him intently and lit a cigarette. The mechanic had a swarthy, hollow-cheeked face and childish blue eyes.

"I wrote in a paper... that everything going on in this country was filthy and that it would do no harm if... if they all went to hell!"

"Fine!" Ardeleanu began to laugh. "And why did you write that?"

"Because I could stand it no longer!"

He jumped down from the bench, went up to the teacher's desk and took up Zweig's book from the table.

"Look at this, just to see that everything is old in this world and has happened before. Would you mind my reading you some passages?"

"Not in the least; fire away."

Andrei began to read, impatient to get to the most interesting chapters describing the oppression which crushes the internal force of men, changes them, distorting their souls. Neither of them noticed how time flew. Aunt Emilia called Andrei to dinner. It was only then that Andrei told himself uneasily that Ardeleanu had listened to him out of sheer politeness. He wanted to apologize, but the mechanic forestalled him:

"He does write well. You know what? Go and have your dinner, and after dinner go on reading to me. Will you?"

"Gladly!"

He had his meal in a hurry. He was dying to go on with his book. After dinner they went out in the yard and sat down in the straw. It was warm, the bees were humming round them and the golden light of the sun made everything

glisten: the straw, the leaves, the roof of the school, the clear sky.

Evening was coming on when Andrei finished. He turned to Ardeleanu with sparkling eyes:

"Well, what do you say to that?"

"A beautiful book... And this Castellion was a decent man..."

"He knew how one should live!"

Ardeleanu greedily inhaled the cigarette smoke.

"Now, do you know what I'd have done in his place? I would have raised the country against that fellow Calvin... For as far as I can make out, the people were only waiting for it. For somebody to give them the word."

"Well, but..."

"But don't you see? The man went and wrote and nobody printed his books. Hundreds of years passed before somebody found them. It is splendid that he wrote them, I agree..."

Andrei passed his hand over his forehead. Strange, Schwartz had said the same thing to him. Perhaps he was right... It was the time for action.

"And what can one do today?" he asked bitterly. "What can one actually do today?"

"Oh, lots of things... For instance, open the minds of those around you... For if the people are ignorant, the gents lead them by the nose, as they please."

"And what precisely can one tell them?"

"That, if people rise, nothing can stand in their way. Oh, Andrei, you are young and honest-minded. But take it from me: you can't do anything with honesty alone. It is good that you like this book, although let me tell you something: it talks too much like them, in many words... about freedom, about humaneness. It is something else we need now."

"What exactly?"

Andrei felt ill at ease. "All my discoveries are so naïve. All I need is to find one of my ideas expressed in a book, and I'm satisfied."

"It is necessary that, when the Germans begin to retreat, we should hit at them as if they were mad dogs, from all sides! That's the way to do it. I'm glad we have become

friends. Wouldn't you like to drop in of an evening at my place? People come, sometimes one, sometimes another. We try to plan things..."

"All right, I'll come."

That night, Andrei was very long in falling asleep. He stood before the window, his chin cupped in his hands, looking at the sky. It seemed to him that now he had found an answer to the state of discontent within himself, to the regrets he had experienced after he had been expelled, the torturing feeling that he had done something useless. He told himself that his outbursts, his rebellion against all his environment differed little from Suslănescu's conventionality for instance, from the duplicity of the schoolmasters and of all the people he knew. They were assaulted by a thousand general reasons for discontent, as if mosquitoes had been stinging them, but none of them did anything, and there must have been something that could be done. Everybody was seeking his own freedom, all of them would have liked to put heir own selfish conscience at rest. 'We are strangers in our own country,' thought Andrei, glad all the same hat he had been able to put this into words.

CHAPTER VIII

The "Tribuna Romînă" (Rumanian Tribune) had its officies in a splendid building which used to be a tenement-house. It had an air of mystery suggestive of dark passages and small office rooms where shady business was transacted. The rusty iron entrance door creaked plaintively, so loud that there was no need of a bell to announce visitors. A small white sign-board brightened it up a little: "Editorial Offices and Managing Department of 'Tribuna Romînă,' Daily Newspaper of Rumanian Trend." Of the numerous rooms, kitchenettes, bathrooms and servants rooms, the offices occupied only about four on the east side. In the other all sorts of odds and ends were

collected: shoes, pictures, piles of old newspapers all covered with mould because of the damp, Hungarian and German books dating from about 1905, broken cupboards, shattered iron bedsteads, rubble heaps, rusty chamber-pots, kettles, oil stoves and terracotta slabs. The doors of those rooms were closed with planks nailed across them. The strangest thing in the house was its unusual echo. A word uttered in any of the rooms passed through the walls and the doors, was amplified and wandered about for a few moments, like some invisible living being. That is why, when from the entrance Vîslan roared "Şendrea! Şendrea!" the young secretary knew that at last the miracle had come to pass and Vîslan had found a "subject." He did not wait for him to enter, he unscrewed his fountain-pen, opened a writing-pad and thought blissfully: 'Now I can ask for the arrears on my salary. He's sure to be in a good mood.' Vîslan's countenance fully corroborated his premonition. The chief editor would never have flaunted such a vividly coloured necktie, if he hadn't had some serious reason to do so, the more so that, latterly, Vîslan had seemed to be in mourning, overcome by despair.

The door closed, the thin walls shook slightly like the scenery in a provincial theatre, and from the doorway Vîslan flung his broad-brimmed hat. He was reeking of patchouli and bursting with pride.

"Şendrea!" he cried, shaking him affectionately by the hand, "we're so to say saved!"

"I knew it," smiled Şendrea, "you were sure to..."

"Rot! Not at all so sure... Of late the source of my inspiration seemed to have dried up. Journalism's a risky job. Many a time has the prefect warned me: 'Vîslan, if I may say so, your all too cautious tone might make people suspicious!' Eh, we'll show him now. Everything 's been settled. Monthly allowances have been secured!" He took a step forward, thrust his plump fingers into the button-hole of his fancy waistcoat and, shutting his eyes, cut through the air a newspaper page.

On top, as a motto: 'Those times were worthy of chroniclers and rhapsodes!'* That's all. The next verse wouldn't do. It

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[1]) Well-known line from one of Mihail Eminescu's poems

might land us straight into a concentration camp. Let it be understood we mean our times. All right. How the title... the title... Another verse to keep up our cultural standing: 'At the call of our country all her sons must hasten to defend her and die for her colours!' "

"Rather long!" ventured Şendrea.

"No matter!" Vîslan jumped to his feet clapping his hands: "My subject's a bomb! That gipsy of Şeicaru will go mad. Listen to this; Major Angheliu from the Recruiting Office let it out. It's smashing. A young peasant, the son of well-to-do people, the owners of some land, asked to be sent to the front. D'you hear? What a slap in the face, what a splendid answer to our fears. Şendrea!"

"From the General Headquarters of the Reich:... According to a previously established plan, our troops have withdrawn... falling back to... previously asigned positions and..." said Şendrea reading the main part of the German *communiqué.*

"Rot. Let it be known by all that a people cannot die when they have fought continually for centuries," shouted the chief editor enthusiastically. He then suddenly frowned: "What's that? What were you saying? But doesn't it mention the secret weapon?"

"Not a word."

"We're done for! We're done for, Şendrea! (Şendrea was not surprised in the least; he was used to such transitions.) "Say, what'll we do if... if they get here?"

"Ink, sir..." began Şendrea blandly.

"Has no colour," added Vîslan completing his favourite phrase. "So... No, why won't you let me finish?" he asked wrathfully. "Listen to what I have to say, and then you can tell me the... rumours! The young man I told you about was not exempted. He was ! liable to conscription thundered Vîslan solemnly. "He grew tobacco on his plot, according to the rules established by the State Monopolies. And still... still... Major Angheliu will have it that he was insane, but the major's a fool. Why do *you* not want to go to the front?" he asked Şendrea, staring intently at him.

The latter laughed, as if hearing a good joke.

"The major's right," he said, to oblige.

"What of it ? Will that stop me from writing my 'leader' ? Now, no more tittle-tattle. Shut up and listen until I get inspired."

Vîslan sat astride on his chair, resting his chin on the back of it and closed his eyes. Şendrea, watching for the smallest sign, was following him. He liked Vîslan very much. It was thanks to him that he earned a little money when he was on holiday, that he got into the best circles in town, for Vîslan called him officially "my successor." He had no idea where the chief came from. It was said he was a native of Oltenia, and had never been to any higher school. Before King Carol's dictatorship, he had been a newspaperman supporting in turns the Liberal, the National-Peasant, Iorga's, Averescu's, even the Socialist party, dreaming all the while to set up his own party made up of intellectuals and artists. By the end of the Iron Guard dictatorship Vîslan disappeared from town, and no one had been able to make him say where he had been during that time. He returned with a subsidy from the Marshal to found a cultural newspaper supporting the government in the bargain. Overnight Vîslan became a man of importance, rolling in gold, yet always short of money. Apart from the leaders which analysed the international situation, he had brilliant ideas from time to time. During the Stalingrad battle period, when all the articles had the tone of heroic requiems, he imagined an ingenious system: in the obituary column he wanted the name of the family physician of the deceased to be mentioned alongside those of the grieved relatives. This wasn't actually blackmail, and Vîslan greatly advertised this plan, disturbing the peace of mind of the town's physicians. He did not put his plan into practice, but renewed his stock of clothes. He would have liked to dress well, but was utterly devoid of taste; people, however, made allowances, for wasn't he, after all, a Bohemian ?

He had a passion for collecting witticisms uttered by famous persons, repeating them when in company, as if they were his own. Suslănescu, the schoolmaster, supplied him with those sayings desinterestedly and gladly, and translated them for him from the French.

Vîslan had still another friend, Jacquot Robber, the only son of a very original commercial traveller who had made and lost his fortune five times, before going mad. Young Robber was an intellectual permanently absorbed in various problems; when Vîslan was with him, he had the sensation of breathing the rarefied air of mountain peaks. In Vîslan's friendship for Robber there entered a small — indeed a very small — doze of cunning: he meant to show everyone he was a philo-Semite, and begged Jacquot to write articles which the latter signed "Prometheus." The *leit-motif* was the ruin of culture and the praise of the gratuitous act vital and artistic *par excellence*. Vîslan rated those articles as being extremely clever. Robber junior was a Platonist (he had studied philosophy for two years at the Jassy University), but only as far as ideas were concerned. In practice he went in for some very strange sort of business, and had a knack for squeezing out of Vîslan the fee for the same article two or three times over. He could arouse his liberality with such shattering pathos that Vîslan always had the feeling of being indebted to him. Now, with closed eyes, racking his brains how to begin his article, he was wondering what Robber would write on the same subject.

No doubt, he would begin with a quotation from the talks between Goethe and Eckermann (Vîslan told himself for the hundredth time that he must absolutely read the book too.) Then Jacquot would find some ancient myth — Prometheus, Pygmalion or Leda — and draw a very interesting parallel: ancient heroes, contemporary heroes, as seen in the colossal vision of an Arno Brecker, and from this to the gesture of Iosif Cloambeș of Lunca there would be but one step. He would certainly start with some cute quotation from *Mein Kampf*.

"Culture," said Vîslan energetically, "is a great thing."

Șendrea wrote quickly, shortening the words, but he soon stopped amazed:

"I don't see the connection... Mr. Vîslan..."

"Did I tell you to take it down?... It was just a passing remark..."

He got up from his chair, walked about with his hands behind his back, scattering with the toe of his shoe the

papers and rubbish lying about on the floor, ruffled his small brown beard and declared:

"Hang it all, I've got no ispiration. And I want it to be a first-class thing, a thing that will create a sensation."

"Shall I try?" whispered Şendrea timidly. The payment of the arrears of his salary still seemed a good way off: with Vîslan one never could tell.

"No, listen here! Will you kindly run downstairs, take a taxi and fetch me Jacquot Robber? He's sure to be at home at this time. Here's a hundred-lei note. Don't give the driver more, tell him you're a journalist. But don't come back without Jacquot, get me?"

"D'you think it's wise?"

"Don't you teach me! Get off, we'll soon have to send it to the printers!"

In the half-hour before Şendrea returned with Robber, Vîslan walked about his office, along the passages, entered the office of the typist whose typewriter made the boards shake, caressed the back of her neck absent-mindedly, ruffling the soft fair curls, asked her discreetly if she hadn't listened in to the B.B.C., then, on hearing Robber's loud voice, he ran quickly, excitedly, to meet him.

Jacquot Robber was a young man of about twenty-five, tall, lean, with a narrow and extremely bulging forehead overhung with long thick hair, curly and grey with dandruff, but unexpectedly sparse in front. He was wearing a smart coat of greenish velvet, with a slit at the back, a shirt with an Italian collar and a heavy silk necktie. He had yellow-green, almond-shaped eyes and a mouth like the bill of a duck. He never stopped gesticulating, waving his big white hands about. His face was arresting: it was so mobile and expressed with such rapidity a variety of contradictory states of mind that one might have said Robber lived only with his face.

"Master of Calatrava, your servant!" said Jacquot taking off his grey hat and placing it on his heart in a mediaeval greeting.

"Şendrea, my dear boy, would you mind leaving us to ourselves?" groaned Vîslan embarrassed. And to avoid hurting his feelings, he took him by the arm and led him

into the other office. Şendrea, however, was only flustered and, putting his mouth to Vîslan's ear, said quickly:

"Oh, what a fright I had! Whom do you think I found at Jacquot's? A German officer. They were talking in German. I couldn't make out a single word. They seemed to be on the very best of terms."

Vîslan shrugged his shoulders but showed no sign of surprise. He came back to his own office which Robber was pacing from one corner to another. In a few words Vîslan told him what he expected him to do.

"Jacquot, be a dear and help me out of a fix. I've got no inspiration."

"Hum," said Jacquot, frowning. The skin on his face gathered around his eyes, making little creases. The effort made his ears move imperceptibly. "You see, my dear Ionel..."

"I won't grudge the money..."

"That isn't the point!" returned Jacquot angrily. "But it would be better if... I'd do anything to help you. In the times we are living the only ethical coordinate still intact in its value is friendship. But you see... I shouldn't like people to know that I..."

"Perfect discretion," Vîslan assured him, his hand on his heart.

"That isn't what I mean, Ionel. No, it isn't! Who can tell me for sure that some day, unwittingly, during a booze, in the bed of some lady-love, you may not let out a word... and you understand, don't you?"

"Hang it all man!" Vîslan said, losing his temper. "What the devil! Are you starting again? (When Jacquot would start having scruples, Vîslan felt a ball of ice forming in his stomach. His friend bewildered him with a pelting shower of words, arguments, images, maxims, and when he finally gave him money — the whole peroration had anyhow no other object — Vîslan felt grateful to him for accepting it. But, before reaching the simple and plain solution which both knew beforehand would be reached, they would squabble, make it up, swear friendship and faith to one another, make plans for the future, threaten to blackmail one another, kiss and then send the servant out for a bottle of wine.)

Robber was still pacing the room, moving his lips. He pursed them, stretched them out like elastic, touched them gingerly with the tip of his thumb, then, wrinkling the skin of his forehead, designed a musical staff on it.

"It isn't scruples, but you see my position. Of course you always refuse to see things from my point of view, to try and understand..."

"Listen, man!" roared Vîslan not caring that the thin walls made his voice so sonorous. "I'll give you two thousand lei!"

"In that case," bawled Robber stooping, "I'm off. Good bye!"

"Jacquot, for Goodness' sake! Don't let me down! Damn it all, two thousand five hundred. I couldn't give one leu more. I haven't got it, please believe me."

"D'you think a Jacquot Robber sells himself?"

Vîslan was desperate. Everything in his mind was getting mixed up: the prefect's words, the barely veiled threat, the lack of ideas, the splendid subject which would bring in a new subsidy. Tears came to his elyes and he knelt down, his hands lifted as though in prayer. Robber rushed at him, lifted him up, dusted his trousers, let his chin sink on his chest then, stretching out his arms cross-like, consented.

"Alright."

"Three thousand," said Vîslan heaving a deep sigh.

"Take up your pen and write!" ordered Robber.

Again he started pacing the room, then he suddenly came to a stop and threatened Vîslan with his finger, saying:

"Don't think... I'm selling myself for your money!"

"Dear me, no, Jacquot! It's only out of friendship... I understand, hang it all."

"And if I praise the Germans, it's because I admire them sincerely! Sincerely!"

"Me too, me too," Vîslan hurried to add. "I swear. They're... brave..."

"They're the very essence of manliness, that's what they are, sir! Just look at every officer, every private, at the proud angle of their step! Look at their martial appearance, at their symbolic Teutonic helmet. They're

cruel, they're brutes, yes, I agree, but in such a pure state that, philosophically speaking... What's your hero's name?"

"Iosif... Cloambeş," sighed Vîslan, "I'm waiting."

"The ethnic vitality of a nation is turned to good account in moments of emergency. That is why natural, spontaneous reactions are more illustrative than thousands of columns of figures, comparative data and learned studies."

"Marvellous!"

"Don't interrupt me now!" Jacquot snapped, sucking his thumb nail. "I'm dictating... The propelling force of ideation, constantly renewed from its primary substance, is uninterruptedly incarnated, assuming various proportions in the minds of different men of the different strata constituting the social organism. Thus, a poet, a philosopher, a soldier will act differently in identical circumstances. This is a strictly determinable fact.

"I trust you understand my idea: the Promethean flame, the source of an infinity of fires... "(Quite... it's all perfectly clear," whispered Vîslan. "But the most amazing thing is the reaction of people still uncorrupted by civilization and the organic idleness and *laisser-aller* which they bring into town-life. (This is a well-known idea. The Germans put it into practice in France, through Pétain's words: '*Retour à la terre!*') Here, in the unpolluted life of a village, the peasants' minds are an extraordinary receptacle... 'of a boundless potency' for these imponderable ideas constituting the specific ethnical character of the respective nation."

"A masterpiece, indeed!" muttered Vîslan thoughtfully. "You're a genius."

"I know it. Proceed. There is an English saying: 'Facts are stubborn.' No, correct it! a German saying... Let's get on: facts are stubborn, they speak for themselves. So here are the facts... Now, old man, it's up to you to relate minutely all the facts concerning your volunteer. It's too dull for me. So leave a few blank lines. Now, let's give the thing the right touch. Take this down quickly: comments, speculations would be superfluous ('As it is, it will cost me at least three thousand five hundred lei,' thought

Vîslan in a business-like way), they are necessary, if not for people of Iosif Cloambeș's importance, at least for clergymen who oppose, their dull stubborn resistance against the new order to hide in fact their biologic incapacity of adapting themselves to the new order, to the European commandments, to the joint efforts of culture against an age of terror and darkness. Those clergymen complain, calling upon grand but hollow-sounding principles... Notice the mobility of my style, Vîslan!"

"You're a great man, indeed!"

"...that our age is devoid of the refinement, the polish and grace of by-gone centuries. (*Vae victis!)* Woe to those who, while conquering, thanks to their objective integration into a particular space and race, take pity on the vanquished. In the hour of complete victory they will be called to account by people such as Iosif Cloambeș (what a name!), the living pillars and justification of a national revolution."

"Jacquot... it's a pity... a pity... you aren't..."

"No, it isn't! I'm secretive! Let's get on. Therefore, in vain does plutocracy allied to Bolshevism..." he stopped, scratched his head, produced his comb and smoothed down the untidy threads of hair. "Vîslan... put in, before Bolshevism, to Judaism... blast it! ('Four thousand!' thought Vîslan shuddering)... Where were we? Oh yes... menace with its hordes. Every man has the receptacle that gave birth to Iosif Cloambeș, the symbolic hero, the knight *sans peur et sans reproche!* At the call of the providential man who ordered, cleaving history in two:' I order you to cross the Pruth, to cross the Dniester, to cross the Boug, to cross the Don, to cross the Volga..."

"Jacquot!"

"Shut up! Don't you understand the sarcasm? We've crossed them... back... You see, we've got to put in some resistance work as well, old man! Hurry up and write, as I'm getting fed up: millions of Iosif Cloambeș shall rise to defend the frontiers in danger, the existence of this nation, the land, the past, the present and the future. Full stop. My money!"

"Listen, my lad... I haven't got it on me... but tomorrow, tomorrow morning, I'll give it to you, sure

I will...'' Seeing Robber frowning, Vîslan became nervous. "I give you my word..."

"I don't believe you."

"An I. O. U..."

"Alright."

Vîslan hurried to write down: *I hereby acknowledge that I owe Mr. J. Robber the amount of* ('4,500' prompted Jacquot) *4,500 lei which I will return not later than June 4,1944, 12 o'clock a. m. I. Vîslan.*

"That'll do. Now I must be off. Bye-bye, my dear fellow. Ring me up every time you want to come and see me. I'll be expecting you tomorrow. So long."

Vîslan heard him whistling merrily while going downstairs, taking two steps at a time. He took his writing-pad and rushed into the adjoining room. He shrieked:

"Miți! Type this! Leader! Headline: 'Astounding Examples'... And now start taking it down: The ethnic vitality of a nation..."

No other noise was heard except the clatter of the typewriter, which filled the whole building, like the sound of a machine-gun firing uninterruptedly.

*

Lawyer Salvator Varga's car entered the factory yard, tracing a graceful curve. Varga could not help looking around to see if anyone had noticed what a skilled motorist he was. The courtyard was in fact full of people, but no one paid attention to him. The lawyer parked his car alongside Captain Prodan's, noticing with surprise the presence of a long car, a Mercedes Benz which he had never seen before. 'Fancy,' he said to himself enviously, "Dărnescu has bought himself a car to show his political optimism." He took off his gauntlets, locked the car door and made for the manager's office. Treading cautiously to avoid getting his suède shoes scratched, he saw engineer Şoldan waving his arms furiously amidst a group of workers who were gazing at him.

"Can't you realize? Can't you understand?" the engineer was roaring, turning round on his heels all the time. "It's sheer madness, that's what it is. Insanity! See for yourselves," he added pointing to the exit at the back

of the yard from where came the puffing of an engine. "Look! I'll be obliged to... Yes, I'll be obliged to report to the manager!"

The workers standing round him kept silent. One of them only — Varga recognized him: the foreman Mihai Jurca — was twisting his white moustache and repeating pensively:

"Well, I never!"

"Tell me, Mr. Jurca, what would you do now, if you were in my place?" the engineer addressed him. "I've taken no notice of many things, of so much disorder. I too, am a Rumanian!" he shouted. "But there's a limit, a limit..."

He was choking with vexation and fear, and breathing stentorously. While turning round nervously, he caught sight of Varga:

"Mr. Varga! Please come and listen to this, sir!"

"What's up?"

"Why, a real thriller. This night the inside rails have been dismantled."

"Oh Lord!" Varga had gone pale, looking bewildered at the empty sleepers.

"Now," entreated Şoldan circularly, "what can I do in such a desperate situation? At one o'clock we've got our usual delivery to perform. My God! Can one trifle with the army? We risk being sent before the firing-squad, we risk being put in the pillory and shot, we risk bringing disaster upon our families, gentlemen!"

"Well, I never!" muttered old Jurca very pensively.

"And where..."

"Mr. Varga," said the engineer catching hold of the lapel of his grey coat. "Mr. Varga! Those rails are not matches or needles that might be lost in a cartload of hay. Why, since this morning we've been searching the whole factory, it's simply preposterons... all the work has stopped and everywhere, everywhere I have the feeling, gentlemen, that I'm being laughed at, that everybody knows."

"Well, let's go on looking for them," said a young worker pulling his greasy cap down over his forehead.

"I feel I'm going mad, sir! one fine day you'll find me going about the factory saying I am Nebuchadnezzar,"

groaned the engineer, passing his fingers through his hair. "For two years all my plans, all my sketches, all my projects have been made under the shadow of a gun. I'm sick of it all!' he bawled and with big steps made for the red building of the management.

Varga followed him, but not before hearing behind them foreman Jurca's very surprised ejaculation:

"Now, just look at that!"

Varga wanted to ask Şoldan what the new car he had seen meant, but the latter seemed too excited.

"I've never complained that they just do as they please, Mr. Varga... That the Skoda shells turn out to be three hundred grammes heavier, so that they can be made to enter the breech of the gun, that half the Brandt mines have imperfect percussion caps. I've said nothing about it, although I risk my head. I pretend to see or hear nothing, I get some other engineer to sign for me. I fall ill on delivering day, but this is going too far. Too far. To lift the rails and get them out of the courtyard that is watched by soldiers, is more than I can understand, upon my word.,. When the Americans bombed the town, I was right in the centre, sir! I sat in the shelter with my eyes closed and prayed: Oh God, let them destroy the factory down to the ground, so that there may be an end to my worries! But they didn't. They destroyed empty goods-trains in the station, the shelters for civilians in the park, the new railway apprentices, hostel, and now they've stopped coming... they've stopped!

"But, Mr. Şoldan, you shouldn't..."

"How can I help it? I've had enough of your imbecile advice," cried Şoldan looking as if he were about to strike him. "What do *you* care? You've got a sinecure, a car, a salary, and you'll have work to do only when you are called in as a lawyer to draft the legal papers proving my sabotage. You parasites!'

"Now then... now then..." said Varga, his lips trembling with indignation. "You're going too far," The engineer, however, had turned his back on him and was running like mad towards the wing of the factory, which had been destroyed by the bombardment.

"Go to blazes!" muttered Varga, as he lit a cigarette and with his well-balanced step mounted the steps leading to the manager's office. He entered the dimly lit hall in which the air was fanned by a ventilator which rhythmically moved the leaves of the dwarf ficus, palm-trees and lepidodendra, lined along the walls in cases filled with earth. The doorkeeper saluted him raising his hand to the peak of his cap, but when Varga, after smiling to him affably, was about to go to the left, the doorkeeper stopped him saying:

"There's a letter for you, sir. Here it is."

Astonished, Varga tore open the envelope bearing the factory's heading, read the letter, passed his fingers over his eyes, wondering if he were not a prey to hallucination.

"*We hereby beg to inform you that you have been transferred to the* "Indagrara" *factory, in the same capacity as legal adviser.*

The firm avails itself of this opportunity, to tender its sincerest thanks for the devoted services you have rendered. Your name has been sent to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, proposing your being awarded the order of "The Star of Rumania." You are kindly requested to call at the cashier's in order to receive your dividends for the whole period of 1944, trusting you will see in this modest reward a token of our deep gratitude.

Yours sincerely
P. Dărnescu,
Manager

After he had read and re-read the letter without understanding a word of it, the lawyer went up to the doorkeeper, who had been watching him indifferently, and, offering him a cigarette, asked in a very friendly way:

"What's going on here, Mr. Măcean ?"

Flattered, the man put a finger to his lips:

"A pretty kettle of fish, sir!" The telephone rang and the door-keeper lifted it respectfully: "Yes, sir!..." yes sir! This very moment sir!... Yes, I see sir!..." "It's the manager," he turned familiarly to Varga. "He said you should go and see him this evening... without fail" And he whispered to him: "Some Germans have

come... about five of them. Two officers, the rest civilians. They came last night, immediately after you left. They've never left the manager's office since then. I've kept taking in cups of black coffee... I think..."

"What do you think of it?" said Varga, urging him to speak.

"I dunno, I really can't say," said the door-keeper gloomily.

Varga was under the impression that Măcean did know something, but refrained from asking him any further questions, Without asking leave, he lifted the receiver, pretending not to see the scared grimace on the door-keeper's pink face, dialled the prefect's private telephone number and waited, the toe of his shoe tapping nervously against the leg of a chair.

"Who's that?" came general Belega's baritone voice changed by the wire.

"It's me, Salvator... Say, Laurenţiu, for God's sake, what's happened?"

"Nothing," roared the prefect, "Nothing. What could have happened?" Then quickly... "How is Mrs. Varga, how are the children? All well? Not left yet? No? Why, it's a proof of self-sacrifice, of heroism. I... unofficial... you understand? Come and see me."

"When?" asked Varga, frozen. He realized that he had done wrong in ringing him up. He remembered the buttery face of Fritsch the chemist's and shuddered. "When?" he stammered.

"*Maintenant si vous voulez*, hissed the prefect. "*Mais venez vite!*"

Varga handed the door-keeper a hundred-lei note and went out quickly. "I'll go to the cashier's tomorrow," he said to himself. He was trembling with curiosity and with a secret uneasiness that had been tormenting causing him loss of appetite and hours of sleeplessness. Even his affair with mademoiselle Laugier was a continuous cause of secret fears, and the girl felt it and therefore harassed him with sweetly chirped questions he was unable to answer. Formerly everything had been simpler: they both preferred the eloquence of gestures; now, even Larisse had changed. 'I'll take the car,' he said to himself. 'I've got

the right!" He was not so sura about it: the doorkeeper's fragmentary information had disturbed him: "What are the Germans doing here ? Lord, I only hope it's nothing . . ."

Salvator Varga was consumed with secret horror: he felt that the Germans whom he spoke to, could read his liking for the Anglo-Saxons on his face. He had heard so many ghastly stories about the Gestapo, that every time he had to buy anything from Fritsch the chemist's, his heart sank into his shoes. He would not have gone to another chemist's however. No, not for the world. This would have implied that he had openly taken a stand. While he was racing down the boulevard towards the prefecture, he said to himself that nothing could hinder him now from going to Moneasa. His family had been insisting all the time. Sofia had turned ashen with permanent fear, Teddie was a rake and a good-for-nothing and he would have to take him away from the people he mixed with, asfor Lucian, he did not understand him and was a little frightened of him.

When Varga had left, the door-keeper went into his small room, took the tray with the cups of black coffee which his wife handed him, and, his tongue pressed between his teeth, went up the stairs careful not to spill a drop. When Dărnescu's secretary opened the door, Măcean thought there was a fog in the room: the tobacco smoke hung thick in the air. On Dărnescu's desk, on the other four tables that had been brought in, there lay piles of papers, rubbers and pencils. Dărnescu had taken off his coat and rolled up his shirt-sleeves, uncovering his thick red-haired arms. A tall officer with silver hair and a scar across his forehead, came quickly to the door and jerkily took the tray from Măcean, ordering:

"*Heraus!*" (Get out!)

Thereupon the padded door was closed noiselessly. Măcean looked questioningly at the secretary. Miss Miclea was an old maid with spectacles, a white silk blouse, her hair in a Japanese knot and her fingers yellow with nicotine. She got up, came to him and just said:

"They want to dismantle the factory and cart it away." Then she went out.

"So the boat's sinking," muttered Măcean going downstairs. "Not bad at all."

He quickly went into his cubicle, then to his own room and said to Doru, his son, who was playing on the ragged carpet:

"Run along to the factory and tell Uncle Jurca to come and see me. But mind no one hears you, or I'll box your ears! Look sharp! Hurry up!"

*

Varga's talk with the prefect was extremely brief. He was immediately shown into the general's huge office. He found him quite overwhelmed, leaning his forehead against the large terraccotta stove, feeling its sharp edges blindly. He was as usual in uniform, but without a belt, while his collar was open. Varga stared at him, not knowing what to think. Everywhere, in the ash-trays, ink-pots, even on the edge of the desk, there were cigarette stumps. The prefect forgot to shake hands with him. He only took a few unsteady steps towards him and, leaning with all his weight on the arm-chair, stammered:

"The Anglo-Americans have landed in France. The Atlantic Wall's been destroyed in a few hours. Scores of bridge-heads! They are fighting at Cherbourg, at Caen. Fieldmarshal Rommel — defeated! *Deutschland kaput!*"

Salvator Varga gulped several times like a pike thrown on the river bank. In the room only the discreet buzzing of the ventilator was heard, and the gliding of the displaced air layers.

"And you," shouted General Belega menacingly as if about to fall upon him, "and you, why are you still here? You're happy and free and you may leave when you like; here you are man-alive, risking the life of your family. He rushed to the telephone, dialled a number a few times, then shouted: "Vîslan! Vîslan! I've been looking for you for the last two hours. What are you up to, man?... Wha-a-a-t? Your volunteer be blowed! Mind! Not a single word about the Anglo-American landing. What? You didn't know about it? To hell with you!" he swore throwing the receiver down.

The terrified Varga fled down the stairs. He didn't know what to think. Should he rejoice, tremble with fear, go away, remain... ? He made a rapid reckoning, geograph-

ically approximate: from Normandy to Rumania two thousand kilometres in a bee line... From Jassy some five hundred, also in a bee line. One thing was as plain as a pike-staff: *Finis Germaniae!* He entered the first confectionery and dialled Baron Papp's number. As the number was continually engaged, Varga repeated it with desperate obstinacy for nearly a quarter of an hour until he finally heard the shrill voice of Horia Papp, the baron's son.

"Where's your dad ?" bellowed Varga, out of patience.

The customers in the shop turned to look at him.

"Just a moment, Mr. Varga," Horia hastened to say, having recognized his voice. "Just a moment."

Varga waited, trying to guess from the dim noise heard in the receiver, what was going on in Papp's house; he was startled when he heard the baron's self-satisfied, throaty laugh.

"Well, my dear Varga, what is it you want ? Well, who won the bet ?"

"We must have a talk... as soon as possible."

"Well, just now it's impossible," said Papp openly, "you can imagine I'm not resting, I am busy. Come round, my dear fellow, tomorrow or the day after."

"It's a very important matter, very serious," emphasized Varga: "I don't mean what has made us all so glad. Something else."

"Then come this afternoon," suggested the baron annoyed. "At about five o'clock. I'm having a nap till then. Good-bye."

Varga left the confectioner's and, in the street, ran against a badly dressed man. The latter recognized him and took off his shabby hat quickly and very humbly.

"Your servant, sir. You don't recognize me. Of course, you come in touch with so many people... I'm Antoniu Popa... from Carei... You know... last winter, from the refugees' committee... I have the honour to beg you to take pity on us, because even last winter we had no firewood, and I've got no job, although I've been vainly looking for one every day. I and my wife thought of asking you to put in a kind word for us.

"Firewood ?" Varga laughed amusedly. He took a step back and repeated: "Firewood ? Mr. Popa, in two months at the very latest you'll be back at Carei, in your own home! Firewood! Well, I never!"

"Do you think so, sir ? May God grant it! He's so good and almighty," said the man cringing. And when Varga handed him a hundred-lei coin, he tried to kiss his hand.

"No, no," said the lawyer, embarrassed but flattered at the same time.

"God help us to get back to our homes and cut off the Hungarians' heads! Your servant, sir, good-bye and my most humble regards to your lady."

This encounter and his liberality soothed Varga. As this had been a day spent telephoning, he made up his mind to ring up Larisse and tell her to try and leave the house under some excuse. He would pick her up with the car, they would buy something to eat; and drive to the woods, out of town. He thought of the thrill of he taking off her silk stockings there, on the grass. *La patrie de la liberté est libre* he would tell her. He had always liked French women; they wore stylish undies. He put his hand into his pocket and felt the rustling of the paper he had received from the doorkeeper. At once all his good humour vanished. He would go to the "Indagrara." The manager must know how and why this transaction, whose object he was, had been done. He stepped into the car again, overwhelmed by the events which he couldn't possibly understand.

*

"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost!" said Vîslan on his knees. "Save us, oh Lord! The rivers and the seas have grown turbid."

He was mortal drunk, and thrust under Suslănescu's eyes, not much soberer than he, the latest issue of the newspaper "Curentul." Şendrea looked at them bewildered, and turning round them like a hen about to lay an egg, whilst Miţi rested her long fingers on the key-board of the typewriter. On the desk was the new issue of the "Tribuna Romînească," with Robber's article signed by Vîslan. All the morning Vîslan had been in the highest of spirits, he had re-read

"his" article to himself, first muttering it, then aloud in vibrating tones as for the others, but the prefect's call had quite crushed him. He had fled to the pub where he found Suslănescu, and together had drunk in silence till they were blind drunk. Now they sat stupefied, prostrated on their chairs. The first to break the silence was Şendrea:

"Sir... you mustn't... Now it's all the same."

"What do you mean by all the same?" Vîslan stood up, staggering. His face had turned pale and, his distorted features, expressed ugly, mean despair.

"I don't know what happened," he said with an effort. "I don't know,'upon my word, I don't. All things are rolled up like a pig's tail. What?" he shrieked sharply. "So you think I had no hope? That I, Vîslan, the incapable and illiterate, had no aspirations? I had! Everything has turned out the other way. At last I settled down and started a newspaper, a filthy, corrupt rag, but still it was something. It's just printed paper. And all is crumbling to pieces... everything! I'll be taken to task as if... ink had a colour... And that mad, insane, homosexual Hitler will not! The secret weapon, rot! The Russians will come and hang us, you'll see. You, you'll witness the hanging of Vîslan the corrupter of the district." He hid his forehead in his hands. "Suslănescu, dear fellow, write an article... about Stephen the Great or about Avram Iancu, or about... the devil!"

"I will!" replied Suslănescu promptly, moving his foot. "And I'll sign it... I'm ready to take my responsibility. Give me a quill and a bit of parchment."

That day's article in the "Tribuna Romînă" was extremely dull, a kind of litany. The arguments supporting the impossibility of wiping Rumania from the map were lame but pathetic, and around them, in a kind of saraband, danced the heroes of history holding one another by the hand, anachronically.

*

Lucian realized that something had happened. His father was too exuberant. He pretended to be delighted by the landing in France and said with a forced smile that everything would soon become normal. It would be alright, wonderful. Lucian could hardly wait for the end of the dinner,

to go away. Every one of his father's words hurt him. Since his childhood, his mother had brought him up to worship his family. His father was the brain, the support. Afterwards, day by day, this statue had changed, grown smaller.

While he was going upstairs, Teddie caught up with him and, taking him by the hand, said:

"I say, Lucian... I've invited Sonia, Andrei's friend, for this afternoon. We're planning a trip. Keep her company, please. I'm a little busy. You won't feel bored; she's very clever. Do this at least for your wretch of a brother." And smiling fawningly he added: "Will you?"

Lucian nodded, then regretted it. But Teddie had fled.

He lay down on the sofa, his arms under his head. The book-case, the books piled on the shelves, irritated him. He closed his eyes. During the days after Andrei's departure, his loneliness had been painful. When the hour of their usual meeting approached, he became anxious, expectant... Then he was seized by a torpor, a kind of unusual idleness. Everything seemed to him so remote... His family, people... In the evening, his people related minutely what some acquaintance of theirs had done or said, or how they had spent the day, he stared at them in surprise: did all this interest them really, or was it only a habit? A tender scene: the family round the lamp, calm talks, golden silence. One couldn't fear the morrow. He had adopted their way of seeing the world, always passionless; this concealed a polite indifference. And Lucian discovered in his acquaintances, in his masters, in his school-fellows, certain traits that made them a little ridiculous; he considered their weaknesses with an amused air, with secret satisfaction. Andrei's friendship had shattered all that: for Andrei things looked either black or white, the world worthy of hatred and contempt, and ideals inaccessible. An almost inhuman Utopia. But oddly enough, the passion Andrei put in his words disarmed Lucian, making him feel small and mean. He tossed about angrily. This restlessness of his was not new, as in fact nothing under the sun is new... "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all... and entreprises of great pith and moment, with this regard, their currents turn awry, and lose the name of action." Poor prince! And why had he just promised Teddie to receive

that girl? What was he to say to her? Somebody knocked at the door and he jumped to his feet, blushing. It was only his father, in a thin dressing-gown of green silk with broad silver stripes.

"Don't get up, stay where you are," said Varga mildly, sitting down on the edge of the sofa. "Don't you feel well?" he asked politely and lit a cigarette. "I thought we had better leave town."

"Well, but... what about the factory?"

Varga looked at him admiringly. But he immediately became gloomy.

"I'm there no longer!"

"What?" started Lucian.

"This morning I was discharged politely," said his father bitterly; but at once he made an effort to smile encouragingly: "I think it's much better, under the present circumstances..."

"But why, father?"

"I haven't the slightest idea who did me this 'good turn.' Why? There's something happening, of course..."

Suddenly he leaned forward and Lucian knew that he wished to reveal to him the true reason of his visit.

"Listen: have you talked to Andrei? Did you tell him?"

"Oh, yes, he has already gone away," Lucian replied coldly.

"All right. I hope you didn't forget to mention that... I... we..."

"For God's sake, I told him everything!" Lucian snapped.

"You oughtn't to have..." Varga smiled faintly. "I felt an interest in the fate of this boy... such a capable boy. At any rate..." He lost his temper and shouted: "You consider me a stranger, Lucian! Nobody in this house appreciates my efforts to steer the family-boat through the troubled watere of the times! I expect nothing from Teddie. He is so dissolute. But from you... it's not considerate of you... It hurts me..."

Lucian felt tears coming to his eyes. "We are talking two different languages," he said sorrowfully to himself.

"Why are you... unjust?" he whispered, but his father wasn't listening to him. He pressed his forehead with his hands. Lucian was sorry for him.

"I'm worried about you. I've lived doing my duty as a Rumanian. But you, my dears, you..." Seeing Lucian's grieved expression, he mistook its true reason and, controlling himself, he said: "Oh, I'm exaggerating I suppose. They won't get us after all... I'm off... I'll leave you to your work."

After his father's departure, Lucian realized that he thought of him with pity. A groundless pity which hurt him 'I'll leave you to your work.' This was a silly phrase that gilded his isolation, and at the same time obliged him. 'This is what killed my childhood.' He looked at his watch. 'Why on earth doesn't she come if I've got to put up with this 'visit' too?'

He could never think of Sonia without an unkind desire to separate her from Andrei. The girl probably felt this and consequently shunned him and behaved coolly towards him. Lucian envied Teddie for the offhand way he had of talking silly things to girls. He probablyknew the mbetter.

He heard soft steps on the stairs, then the servant's voice: "Come in, please, miss." He was annoyed that his heart beat when she was shown in; he bowed slightly, yet stiffly, and said:

"Teddie asked me to keep you company till he comes back. Sit down, please..." He took a step towards the arm-chair in which Sonia seated herself. 'She's extremely beautiful,' he said to himself with a kind of regret.

She arranged her gown over her knees, then let her hands rest on her lap.

"Why haven't you left town?" he asked later casually.

"Where could we go? It's the same everywhere..." She shook her head, and a lock of brown hair fell on her forehead.

"Hasn't Andrei written to you?"

He blushed, realizing that he had been indiscreet. But she answered with a wan smile:

"No. But I haven't lost patience. I'm waiting." She stood up and came near him. "I say, you two are good friends. Why did Andrei do... what he did?"

"I don't know, Sonia... Andrei is not like the others," said Lucian warmly.

She nodded.

"That's true, but I wonder whether it's much good to him. I can scarcely understand him. Sometimes I think that he is much older than I, am and sometimes he behaves like a child," she said seriously. "You know what people say... that a girl ought to be wiser than a boy of the same age. Don't you think so?"

"Maybe..."

He thought: 'If Teddie only wouldn't come yet, if he wouldn't come, if he wouldn't come!' He stood up, went to his desk and casually arranged some books. He asked her, looking the other way:

"Tell me, are you fond of him?" She remained silent and Lucian added immediately." I beg your pardon, it's rather forward of me to..."

"Not at all. But I don't know what to answer." She sat down again, brushing the arm of the chair. "You know ... I'm very, very unhappy."

"You?" Lucian asked in astonishment

"If you let me, I'll tell you. My family would like me to marry. You know, we are rather hard up. Father cannot work. There's a doctor who lives next door to us...He has proposed. Mother said I might do as I please, but I feel how glad she would be if..." She laughed bitterly. "It's the same old tale. Parents glad to get a daughter off their hands."

"No, it is not just the same old tale," said Lucian passionately. He felt quite put out. "It is dreadful..." He fancied her, naked, in the arms of an old man whom, he didn't know why, he imagined bald and hairy. "Don't consent! I'll write to Andrei..."

"You mustn't!"

Lucian became thoughful and bit his lips:

"Perhaps you're right. It would be dreadful for him. Why don't you tell your parents that you can't accept, that you can't stand that doctor?"

She didn't reply. She stood up.

"Tell Teddie I can't go on the trip we planned."

"All right."

"Good-bye, Lucian."

"Sonia... Andrei told me you are a great pianist. Wouldn't you like to play something..." He stopped short; he had wanted to say. 'to me.'

"With pleasure, Lucian..."

They went into the drawing-room and she lifted the lid of the piano. A gentle melody poured out like the murmur of a flowing river. Everything was lifeless around... No one made a sign, and the call spread like the surface of a lake ruffled by a stone, forming circles reaching farther and farther, to the place where the light of a hidden sun shone listlessly.

When they parted, Lucian pressed her hand carefully, as if it were made of crystal.

"Tell me please, wouldn't you like us to meet again?"

"Oh, yes! Tomorrow if you like. I sometimes feel so lonely!"

After her departure, Lucian hid at the bottom of the garden. He didn't try to think of their talk — he had almost forgotten it — but of its simplicity and sincerity. He sat there long, and when he came back to his room, he looked round it in surprise. Nothing had changed, but it was the first time a girl had entered it. She had blue, thoughtful eyes, a very clear skin, a sad child-like mouth and unaffected movements; she had told him, smiling, a small drama.

Teddie came very late and a little tight.

"Has Dulcinea been here?" he asked. "What do you think of her? She'd make a first-class harem lady!"

Lucian looked at him furiously, without saying a word.

"What's the matter with you?" laughed Teddie. "Have you fallen in love with her?"

"Shut up!" shouted Lucian losing his temper. "You idiot!"

Teddie was puzzled and rushed out of the room, without a word.

*

When Măcean told Mihai Jurca that a German commission had come in order to dismantle the factory, the latter shook his head and looked at him doubtfully. The excited door-keeper talked in whispers, looking furtively about him.

"Well, and what if they do?" said the old man. "It's their business. Let's see to the business for which we are paid by the state."

Măcean made a wry face:

"You see, Uncle Jurca..."

"D'you know what?" shouted the old man furiously. "You'd better keep your mouth shut. What's come over you? Would you like to go to prison? Haven't you seen that?" And he pointed to a green poster representing a convict straining under a huge pick-axe. Underneath the picture was the warning:

He who will chatter like a fool
In prison does land as a rule.

Uncle Jurca frowned suddenly and the stiff hairs of his brows bristled. "You must shut up, Măcean! Like a fish! This is no joke!"

He turned his back on him, leaving him abashed. All the day long foreman Jurca was grumpy. He found fault with the workers, nothing pleased him.

About noon he was invited by Filoftei to have a glass of plum-brandy. They sat down at a little table at the back of the "Classical Pearl." Filoftei was the man who enjoyed the manager's confidence, as he was always willing to have a worker sent to prison for the slightest trifle. One night, some months before, he had nearly been beaten to death; someone had thrown a sack over his head, then he had been dragged along to the destroyed wing of the factory and thrashed soundly. Since then he seemed to be frightened, but old Jurca knew Filoftei was watching. He was a wicked sulky man. Since his wife's death his only care was to make a situation for his son, an undergraduate at Sibiu. He would leave no stone unturned to provide him with more and more money. He loved his son as a dog loves his master; when he got a letter from him, however short it might be, he read it to anyone who was willing to listen to him, and shed tears. He couldn't stand Jurca, but seeing the manager valued him, he talked to him blandly, although in his absence he reviled him as much as he could.

Filoftei looked thoughtful this time. He sipped his drink, then, bending towards Jurca, said:

"Have you heard, Mihai, that a German commission has come to dismantle the factory?"

"What? Good gracious!" said Jurca crossing himself. "What are you talking about? I don't believe it."

"I assure you! I got the news from Mr. Ignat. He saw them." He grimaced with his wrinkled little face. "What'll we do then? We'll be sacked."

"Never!... The state needs workers... And we shall find a job somewhere, to be sure. I don't like to meddle with such matters... I know my place."

Filoftei looked at him suspiciously. Was he not making a fool of him? Everyone knew that Jurca had formerly been a communist; he had been arrested several times, and the Secret Police had been after his son for the last four years. But now Filoftei was worried. If the factory was taken away, where would he find money for his son? Education was very expensive nowadays, and now, just at the end...

"Damn this life," said Filoftei rising to his feet. "No matter how hard one tries, one always fails... Let's go, Mihai, I'm afraid those rascals will be up to some mischief again. Whenever I'm not looking, they stop their engines. They'll never take a lesson, the b... fools."

"You're right," nodded Jurca. "That's what they are."

After parting with Filoftei, Jurca leant against a wall sullenly and rolled himself a cigarette. So Măcean had not imagined all this. He looked at the smoky factory buildings thoughtfully. In the yard full of rusty boilers, wheels and other pieces of iron, some workers were walking about idly. As soon as they saw Jurca, they pretended to be in haste and disappeared round a corner, where they sat down to smoke. The old man smiled:

"You shirkers!" The committee would have to be announced immediately. No doubt about it. But he was to meet the liaison man only on Saturday, and so many things might happen till then. It was only Monday. Well, well, this would have to be cleared up. It's lucky that Holtzmann is vigilant, it's lucky indeed, but when you have such a task to fulfil... Of course Holtzmann would find something, he's a very trustworthy and clever fellow. In 1941, when he arrived from Cluj, he was as sleek and nimble as a cat. 'Well, all right,' he said to himself. 'We'll find a way!'

He walked towards the big shops to make his rounds. 'If the boys only knew!' he laughed in his fatherly way. "They are afraid of me, poor lads. Eh, when everything will be cleared up!..."

When he was going to enter the shop, a "lad" (for Jurca every worker of the factory was a lad) came up to him, laughing.

"Well, Mr. Jurca," he said, "the rails have been found at last. They were among the iron lying about in the bombarded wing of the factory. They're not all there, but..."

"I'm very glad, I'm very glad." Answering a look of the lad's, he said only: "At the first bombardment. Don't you worry."

Roşu nodded.

(He was Jurca's assistant in the shock-team. His brother had been discovered in 1943 while he was slipping a load of explosive into an ammunition-train. At the Secret Police headquarters the latter had nearly been beaten to death; they could not get anything out of him. He was shot one Sunday morning in the Fortress. To set an example to the workers, a delegation was forced to attend the execution. Foreman Jurca was among them. The boy, his face all black and blue, could hardly walk and was pushed along by the soldiers. All around there was perfect stillness. The cry of a bird was heard in the hazel-trees, and the flop of the soldiers' boots in the mud. Jurca clenched his fists. "Oh, laddie, laddie..." The next day, in the show-window of the "Tribuna Romînă" appeared the photo of the execution: "How a Moscow agent was punished." The same day a brand-new locomotive was blown up. Roşu's brother had asked for this mission.

There were lots of people in the big yard. The rails were being fixed. Engineer Şoldan, dead drunk, was bawling, happily, and Captain Prodan, the military inspector, was bawling because the work was going on too slowly.

'Well,' said the old man to himself, 'let's start the belt-gearings.' He mixed among them, took the lead of a group and made them hurry. He didn't know who was Gheorghe's liaison man. Maybe Horváth, maybe Burdan. He said:

"In any case, the Germans are the most decent allies. We shan't be bombed, thanks to them. There is a commission here that will take the factory to pieces and carry it away to Germany, according to a previously established plan..."

About three o'clock the rails were fixed and a goods-train entered the yard. They began to load the ammunition-

cases. Before going home, Jurca looked at the line of men winding their way among the bits of iron. 'This train won't reach the front either,' thought the old man smiling. He looked at his watch. He had to hurry if he wished not to be late for his appointment with the major. He crossed the deserted park, dug up by bombs, and saw Bota coming towards him. He handed him over the package of trotyl, then parted. All this was so simple... The train must not reach the front.

At home he warmed up the maize-porridge, of which he always cooked a large portion, and lay down on the worn leather sofa, where Gheorghiță used to sleep. He produced his pipe. What a host of memories it called up! He lit it. 'Let's see if I haven't forgotten Russian,' he said to himself: *) *Zdravstuite, tovarishchi Kapitan... Ia toje bil v Krasnoi Armyi, vo vremia revolutsyi... Protiv Denikina...*

*

Varga had not believed there would be so many people at the baron's. He had forgotten to say what time he was coming, and nobody answered the bell for him. He stood for quite a while, his ear against the big white gate, but no noise reached him. Cursing, especially because it had begun to rain and he had not taken his raincoat, he ran, taking shelter close to the walls, to the nearest public telephone, and rang up the baron. A maid-servant answered the telephone and told him at once that the baron was not in, that he had gone to Zerind. But when she heard who was ringing up, she said curtly:

"Will you please come round."

Varga was shown into the house by a maid-servant, a ruddy, large-eyed Transylvanian girl who led him through a great many rooms full of heavy, sombre furniture, faded pictures, and caricatures from the time of the baron's parliamentary activity. They went through a long hall, the walls of which were hung with green cloth of the kind with which people usually cover their billiard-table. On

*) My respects, Comrade Captain, I've already served in the Red Army, during the revolution... Against Denikin...

the walls hung the baron's hunting trophies of all sorts and a great many empty gun-cases. At last they reached a locked door, at which the maid-servant knocked several times. In the meantime Varga pinched her back and she slapped his hand, good-naturedly, and tittered.

"Who's there ?" rang out a hoarse voice behind the door.

"It is I, Salvator... What do all those precautions mean ?

The door opened and Varga stopped on the threshold bewildered. Tables, desks and chairs had been brought into the drawing-room of the late baroness. It was full of people: Lucaci, the headmaster of the high school; four lawyers, his colleagues: Antoniu Guiașiu, the honorary president of the "Hilaria" choir, Dr. Emil P. D. Motzeanu, Dr. Remus Pordea and the young lawyer and poet Nicușor Spinanțiu, the Reverend Ioachim Potra, Professor Silviu Burtea. They all constituted, together with Varga, the *élite* of the National-Peasant party of the town. A little aside, occupying an immense armchair which he filled entirely, sat the retired General Onoriu Mîndru, a former Liberal senator. Baron Romulus Papp of Zerind was presiding.

The latter, who was wearing a new pepper-and-salt frock-coat, was sitting rigidly on a finely carved straight-backed chair. He preserved his usual mysterious attitude; his eyes alone glittered at times behind the round lenses of his *pince-nez*. With sacerdotal movements, he sipped his lemon squash from time to time. A thick smoke floated in the room, which the baron did not mind, although he was no smoker himself. He motioned Varga imperceptibly to sit down on a chair by the door. This stung Salvator to the quick. Even to this meeting — and to all appearance it was a meeting — he had not been summoned. Although the baron usually came to their house, it was clear that he could not forgive Varga's attitude in 1936, when for a short time he had gone over to Iorga's party. But he had done so because he had been humiliated in connection with the board of directors of the "Unio" bank of Satu-Mare. And now, the precise indication of that chair, while there were three other unoccupied chairs placed in more favourable positions in the drawing-room, had very much vexed him. 'Not the least show of gratitude for all my sacrifices,' he thought, blowing his nose in order to hide his expression of anger,

unwise at this moment. 'I who have always been a model of loyalty... Oh, man's ingratitude!'

His entrance had caused a lull, but soon Emil P. D. Motzeanu stood up massively, leaning against the edge of the table, and shaking his leonine head.

"I insist upon knowing first the opinion of the centre!"

"How can we know it?" snapped Guiaşiu in a shrill voice. He was short, bald and pale, with protruding eyes sheltered by greenish spectacles. "How can we learn it? It will take so long that everything will be over by the time."

"Allow me to state my opinion," said Remus Pordea smiling unctuously; he had a lock of black, oily hair, twisted into the shape of a snail, to hide his baldness, which made him resemble Georges Bonnet. I think that none of us will take the risk of travelling to Bucharest, for fear of imminent bombardments. But I believe that the responsibility of an attitude in a matter, the gravity of which I think — and I hope you'll agree with me — consists in the procedure adopted, rather than in its substance: namely, the pressure that has been exerted, which excludes any possibility of negociation...

"What is at all about?" asked Varga leaning over towards Nicuşor Spinanţiu.

The latter smiled, showing his white, very small teeth, and whispered to him in the tone he would have used when speaking about some social event.

"The German Commission..."

"Oh!" nodded Varga who immediately felt that henceforth the question of the dismantling of the factory had become completely indifferent to him. He even asked himself, prudently, if it wouldn't be wiser to keep out of it, now that the affair was taking such a serious turn.

"Will we let them rob us?" put in the headmaster of the high school sulenlly.

Burtea approved with an eloquent inclination of his head. The Reverend Potra spoke with his usual fiery eloquence:

"Gentlemen and dear friends, let us not forget that we are Rumanians."

"No more of your bombastic words," murmured Guiaşiu, "this isn't a pulpit."

"We are in the pulpit of the nation," returned Potra passionately. "The eleventh hour has struck. We've got to understand its significance."

"Your Reverence is right," said Remus Pordea turning to him, gently stroking his thin moustache, "but may I ask: who's going to assume the responsibility? For my part..."

"We've had enough of that Pontius Pilate policy!" said Potra allusively.

"Come, come, my dear chap," said the baron trying to soothe him affectionately, and Potra looked at him with filial gratitude.

The son of a peasant family from the neighbourhood of Blaj, he had been maintained at the seminary and later on at the institute "De Propaganda Fide," by Romulus Papp. Consequently, in his presence, he tried to control his passionate outbursts. He spoke pathetically, but in a lower voice.

"In fact," said Guiaşiu tapping faintly with his silver pencil on the glass covering the desk, the point in question is either a downright refusal which would rouse public opinion, or utter silence.

"Considering the consequences," said Potra, "I'm afraid we shall be taken to task. What do you think, baron?"

"I'm an old man," sighed Papp, "and it's a difficult task for me to find my way about in such important, muddled situations. I've somewhat lost the knack."

They all exchanged looks full of understanding and admiration. They were well aware of the baron's political tact, a copy of what the head of the party would have done in similar circumstances. By calling him familiarily "the sphinx of Zerind," they paid him the greatest possible compliment.

"Let's listen to friend Varga's opinion too," the baron urged.

"Gentlemen," said Salvator, "I think we have no right to surrender! Germany's fate is sealed."

"What makes you seem so sure?" said Nicuşor Spinanţiu with a studied smile. "To my opinion, historical analogies..."

"Leave them to Vîslan," put in Papp. "Let's not stray."

These words made Varga think that the baron looked with favour on the idea of starting an action, any action. He consequently plucked up courage, left his chair and took a step forward.

"Supposing the Germans dismantle the factory and take it away, don't you think we'll be taken to task by the other parties ?"

"Which ?" wondered Papp.

Varga was scared again. Should he not have understood the baron's previous words ?

"Well, supposing we're under occupation some time or other, won't lots of right- or left-wing political organizations be active ?"

"And by whom shall we be occupied ?" cried General Mîndru suddenly, trying to stand up from the arm-chair in which he had lolled in. "Yes, by whom shall we be occupied ?"

"By the Russians, for instance," Varga taunted him with a sarcastic smile.

"Damn it all! Give me two divisions and I'll stop them in the Carpathian passes till Aisănhofăr's divisions debouch in the Panonian plain."

Then, tired by his efforts, the general sat down in the arm-chair again, produced a sweet out of his pocket, and chewed it listlessly.

Varga had remained standing. He had a feeble voice, breaking into higher tones when nervous, so that he couldn't run the risk of a discussion with arguments of vocal volume.

"We must needs use all our influence to prevent this robbery," he said during a sudden lull.

"Quite," Potra agreed.

"We can't take this responsibility," declared Guiaşiu on behalf of the lawyers. "We run the risk of being arrested and..." At the thought, his sharp chin began to shake.

"What about putting off our decision ?" said Papp finally. "Maybe we'll find somebody who's going to Bucharest. I'll have a talk with General Belega too, so's to hear his opinion. There's no use in being rash..."

Though the talk lasted till late after midnight, no conclusion was reached. All of them went home with a feeling that they had started a dangerous game. The

only man from whom they could have found out something precise, and whom they all rang up, in spite of the late hour, was Dărnescu. But the latter had not been at home for two days. He had his meals and slept at the office, together with the Commission, and that convinced them that something was happening, something very serious, with incalculable consequences.

*

One Monday morning, the volunteer Iosif Cloambeș was arrested at his home by the *gendarmes*. He tried in vain to explain to the non-commissioned officer who had come from town to fetch him. The latter shouted and foamed, threatening to have him shot. He subsided a little when he saw all the money given by Lădoi to his son, in order to see "what could be done." His mother was crying shrilly:

"Oh, my poor son! The light of my life!"

In the train Ioșca and the non-commissioned officer made friends whilst emptying a bottle of brandy, but it was no use; the latter ignored why he had been ordered to take him to the Recruiting Office.

They crossed the town. The sergeant-major, remembering his mission, hastened him on:

"Look sharp, lad, can't you be quicker?"

The Recruiting Office was full of soldiers and hungry-looking peasants carrying bundles on their backs.

From time to time, a sergeant-major passed by quickly, carrying a bundle of files under his arm, and pushed aside with the toe of his boot those who were in his way.

"Move aside, you ox! Was there no other place for you to lie down as flat as a cow's dung?"

"I beg your pardon most humbly. But would you be so good as to tell me..."

"I'm busy. Look for Sergeant Costache."

Major Angheliu was talking to Vîslan whom he had called on purpose, to be present at the "volunteer's" arrival.

"You'll see that it was me who was right about the article, not you. Pooh, my good sir! Peasants are just animals, *mon cher*. I beg your pardon for speaking like this, quite unlike the way a member of the National-Peasant Party would speak. But it's a fact. How long is it since I have been racking my

brains in this ghastly room ?. . . " he wailed, making a broad gesture that embraced the filthy ceiling, the peeling walls and the official portraits of the King and Marshal Antonescu.

'In any case better than at the front,' thought Vîslan vindictively. He had failed to achieve what he had hoped to with his article on the volunteer from Lunca. The prefect seemed to have gone mad. When Vîslan had made attempts to turn the conversation on the grand sacrifice, proving how vitality could be turned to good account, as a prelude to his justified claim for a new subsidy, the prefect had roared: "Haven't read it! I know nothing about it. D'you think, Mr. Vîslan, I feel like reading ? Sorry to have to say that, but you're the limit, Mr. Vîslan!"

In society Vîslan had reaped only incredulous smiles.

"Come now, Mr. Vîslan, it's far-fetched. There's no denying it, the article is splendid. But how could one believe such a thing ? Peasants, allow me to tell you, peasants are too critical to go on fighting for a lost cause."

Vîslan intended to taunt them by publishing a second article with the hero's photo and an interview to let everybody know how things stand. Consequently, he kept pressing Angheliu, at the most unsuited hours, and the latter answered invariably: "No, sir. No news of him. I told you from the beginning that he's a lunatic and an impostor. You'll just make a fool of yourself. Moreover, you did not wait till I checked our lists to see if there is such a name as Iosif Cloambeş in the respective contingent, and you rushed headlong into the matter."

Vîslan had given up hope, when Angheliu rang him up. "Come here, my dear sir, your volunteer's arriving." Now Angheliu's words made him thoughtful, but not too much. The main thing was that the fellow did exist, and that a photo of him could be taken. For the rest, it was of no consequence whether he was mad or normal. In fact he was sure that a fellow who could do such a thing, couldn't but be insane.

Major Angheliu signed a few papers, shouted for a private, handed them to him and turned in a talkative mood to Vîslan:

"Well, sir, what's the news ? You journalists should know everything accurately, minutely!"

"Well," sighed Vîslan, "the news ain't rosy, major. Cherbourg, Caen, Le Havre, have surrendered."

"What do Cherbourg, Caen, Le Havre matter," said Angheliu flaring up. "You've not said a word about the V2 or about the other Vs to come."

"No, because I'm waiting to see them," smiled Vîslan gloomily.

His head ached terribly. He had drunk some bad plum-brandy in the morning.

The major looked at him reproachfully. He was a fanatic partisan of the Germans; he admired their staidness, the elegance with which they wore a monocle (he tried to wear one himself, but his socket was not deep enough, so the glass always fell down, forcing him to twitch his face like a clown).

"As for our volunteer, well, I had to send the *gendarmes* and bring him by force. If that happened in Germany, they would have shot him on the spot, right away. Listen to me, I know these boors, you've been rash."

"Don't let's anticipate," protested Vîslan weakly, tired of the whole thing.

He did not care now. In the last few days he had repeatedly thought of suicide.

The door opened with a plaintive creak, and a second-lieutenant appeared. He said familiarly:

"The volunteer, sir... we've brought him."

"Show him in," ordered Angheliu. "Bring him here, right away," and he struck the table with his fist.

'As a matter of fact,' he thought, 'this fellow Vîslan is not such a fool. He must know something, otherwise he wouldn't make such a fuss about this matter. And, like a jackass, I've discouraged him all the time. How the devil am I to behave now?'

A sergeant pushed Ioşca Cloambeş in. The latter blinked bewildered at the sight of the gilt braids on Angheliu's chest. He had expected to be handled by a sergeant-major with whom he would know how to deal.

"Come nearer!" the major said encouragingly in a low voice. "Come nearer..." Ioşca could not bring himself to cross the threshold... "Step up!" shouted Angheliu. "Why didn't you come in time to report?"

"You see, sir..."

Incensed, the major jumped to his feet. 'He's going to box his ears,' thought Vîslan satisfied. 'He's quite right. The lad ought to be stretched on the ground, and receive twenty-five juicy ones on his backside.'

"Haven't you done your military service?" asked Angheliu, looking askance.

"Well..."

"Yes, sir! That's how you ought to address an officer, damn your eyes, you swine. You've disgraced Rumania, the war, the Rumanian army! You imbecile, you idiot! Now, come on, speak up, don't stand there like a dummy!" He hissed at Vîslan in rotten French: "*Il est une imbécile... une dégénérat.*" Then to Ioșca: "Have you nothing to say?"

"I don't understand anything, sir," said Ioșca hurriedly. He felt as though he were very ill; warm and cold sweat was running down his back. He never stopped wringing his hands.

"*Il se bat jeu de nous,*" said the major, translating a Rumanian expression into his own special French.

He stood up calmly, took a few steps in the room, then, stopping opposite Ioșca and standing on the tip of his top-boots so as to have greater force, gave his face a resounding slap.

"You don't understand?..."

A tear ran down Ioșca's cheek. Angheliu saw it and felt ashamed of his gesture, especially in Vîslan's presence, but he hadn't been able to control himself.

"Listen... young fellow," he said, trying to recover his breath, "come right here..."

Ioșca came near the table and began to weep softly:

"I understand nothing... nothing at all..."

"Shut up!" shouted Angheliu like mad. "Your name is Iosif Cloambeș, isn't it?"

"Yes... Io... sif..."

"Didn't you write this petition?" He pushed a sheet of official paper under his nose.

Ioșca read it carefully over several times, quite bewildered. Everything was right: his name, contingent and village.

"No," he said, his hand on his heart. "I didn't write it. I swear on the holy cross, I didn't."

"How dare you lie? You're trying to fool me... You damned idiot, you swine. Didn't you write it? Who else? My mother? Mr. Ion Vîslan, the editor of the 'Tribuna Romînă?'

He was boiling with rage and remembered his wife's words: 'Lică, you shouldn't lose your temper. You know it isn't good for you, dear.' Quite irrelevantly, he remembered she was to come any moment to take him to the restaurant, as she did not like to cook. It would be the limit if she saw his face all flushed with anger.

"That isn't my handwriting," said Ioșca suddenly brightening up; he was about to take up the fountain-pen from the table and show them how he wrote.

"Do you think that if you change your handwriting now, you'll get round me?" answered the major disarmed by this naïveté. 'Of course, I was right, he is mad, he's stark, raving mad.' He then added: "Let me tell you a thing, my lad. You can't deceive me. I am an old hand and I know you all, from head to foot. You've quarrelled either with your sweetheart or with your family, and you wanted to show them how brave you were."

"I've no sweetheart!" shouted Ioșca.

Vîslan who had followed this scene with listless, vacant eyes, realized that it was coming to an end. He took his camera out, posted himself in front of Iosif, and before the latter could realize what was happening to him, pressed the button several times.

"Thank you," he muttered and sat down again.

Angheliu, annoyed at this interruption, continued in the same flat, kindly, almost fatherly tone:

"Cheese it, you fool! Then you made it up, there in your warm room, and forgot what you did. But we didn't. This gentleman wrote about you in the newspaper, and now all the town is talking about your valour."

"Oh God!" said Ioșca changing colour.

"According to military laws, I ought to have you court-martialed. Do you know what court-martial means today? What's your name? So and so. What did you do? This, that and the other. Then to the wall with you!" Angheliu imitated with his finger the trigger of a gun, pressed it and said: "Boom! Finished! That's what a court-

martial means. But I'm a kind man, though you made me angry as nobody did before, except an about sixty-year-old gipsy, whom I mobilized by mistake." He turned to Vîslan in order to give some variety to the sermon he was obliged to deliver, although he was famishing. "Eh, my dear hero, you've asked to be a volunteer!" and he waved his hand in the air.

From outside came the sound of the horn of a car. 'It must be Anette,' he thought. 'I shall ask Vîslan to dinner too, to avoid her eternal nagging.' He went on hurriedly.

"You've asked for it. You'll be sent to the front next week in a unity of light infantry."

He heard his wife's steps in the passage and was about to begin a speech on the duty of each Rumanian in those hard times, but Ioșca looked at him, ashen pale, his eyes starting out of his sockets, and fell down on the floor. His head gave out a sharp sound like a wooden cannon-ball.

CHAPTER IX

The kerosene lamp made a round spot on the table, like a small pool of light. An unnerving, oppressive heat pervaded the small, low room, and Gheorghe Jurca was talking wearily mopping the sweat off his face. His fingers had made his cigarette wet and, after pulling at it several times, he threw it away, angrily. In front of him, Holtzmann was fingering his spectacles. Listening to what Jurca was telling him, he thought: 'How old he's grown... If it weren't for his eyes, he would look as old as his father. He's getting grey.'

"Yes," Jurca went on, moodily, "in Moldavia too they have dismantled the factories when they've had the time. This too is a sign." He got up and took several steps on the plaintively creaking floor. "Here you can't walk

about," Jurca said gloomily. He sat down again. "So it's all settled. Schwartz will meet that man Robber and get hold of the papers. Our man at 'Diecezana' will print them. D'you know that man Robber?"

Holtzmann shook his head.

"I've seen him several times. He is muddle-headed, but he's got connections. Schwartz trusts him: he says he's an intellectual, always worrying about things, trying to find a way, and so on and so forth."

"Yes, we're all worrying about all sorts of problems. And what's Robber up to now?"

"He used to be a master at the Jewish high school. I think he's doing business now." He scratched his forehead. "I'll tell Schwartz to be wary."

Jurca rolled himself a cigarette.

"And father?" he asked.

"He's a wonderful man," Holtzmann laughed. "He makes fun of everybody, but oh! how shrewdly... For our next action we're only waiting for an air-raid. "Then he asked without any transition: "How are you getting on with Murgescu?"

"Oh, all right. They quite agree with us. You see, they're being pushed on from behind by the masses. And now, if we start this action with the factory..."

"All the same, take care," Holtzmann said softly.

Jurca began to laugh:

"We'll appoint you manager of a canteen for overworked comrades," he joked. "There you'll get rid of the methods... of underground work. Come, come, I'm only joking... Look, it's time..."

Holtzmann got up, went to a crooked table in the corner and, lifting the table-cloth, discovered a wireless set. He put the headpiece on and started turning the switch. Jurca looked at his thin shoulders with their shoulder-blades sticking out below his coat, and at his long bony fingers. He went up to him and, taking the headpiece off, asked him:

"Aren't you feeling tired?... Don't you feel... you know... a little feverish?"

Holtzmann burst out laughing: Jurca was funny when he tried to mother him.

"I believe you'd be a good manager, Gheorghe. There's nothing the matter with me..."

"You young ones!" Jurca muttered, then he put a headpiece on too.

When the Soviet news bulletin came to an end, Jurca said:

"Let's turn in... I'm fagged. Have you had any food?"

"Yes. What about Julia?"

Jurca sighed. He hit something invisible with his fist and began to undress.

"Bad. Very bad. No medicines and... I've spoken to Murgescu. He says nothing's easier. He knows a doctor, some 'socdem' (social-democrat) of theirs. I've only to let him know the address. Of course, it's out of the question. Murgescu pretended not to understand and told me we could come to him with the patient. Meanwhile he has promised me some morphine. That's something, at least."

Holtzmann had undressed in the meantime. He stretched out on the couch and covered himself up with a military greatcoat.

"Put the lamp out," he begged Jurca. "My eyes hurt dreadfully."

When they were wrapped up in darkness, they heard the thin gnawing of mice under the rotten flooring.

"She is aware of it all," Jurca went on gently. "She told me today that... the moment she'd feel that... she'd get up and go out in the street. She knows how hard it was for you to get hold of this house..."

He paused and crossed his arms beneath his head. He felt as if his blood were gliding through his tired body. His thoughts wandered at random.

"Bota will manage to get arms next week. Seventeen pieces to begin with, and ammunition. We must see where we'll do our drilling, and with whom. Are you sleeping?"

"No," Holtzmann said, "I'm listening to you."

"Let's go to sleep," sighed Jurca. "I'm dreadfully sleepy."

He was lying. He was exhausted, but sleep had vanished. He knew that before going to sleep he had to think of tomorrow's meeting with Murgescu. They would settle about the nucleus of armed guards. He was responsible for every man — and there were over a hundred. Now, of course, the Secret Police will make ten times greater efforts and

will try to smuggle somebody in. After that... the leaflets... at night... Wasn't Murgescu... by any chance?...

He said: "Hush!" crossly, then listened intently. Holtzmann was sleeping. He could hear his quiet breathing. It was three years since they had been hiding like this, since every step had to be weighed, like walking on a tight rope.

"Well, damn it, we've done very well, I think," thought Jurca proudly. "How could it have been otherwise? Well, it couldn't." He realized how badly he was missing the old man. At this hour, in a dark corner of the warehouse, they were planning to blow up an ammunition transport; at this hour, at the army stores, Bota was checking the papers, to see what arms could be abstracted; at this hour, somewhere, the Central Committee...

He got up gently and stole to the window. Pushing the thick blanket aside, he put his head out. The town was silent; far off an engine was puffing. No light anywhere. Now that the hour was drawing near, Jurca had a strange feeling, almost a sort of restlessness; but he had to control himself more than ever: to take all necessary measures. In the months left, no mistake was to be made. They had come a long way, and things would soon come to a head. The workers felt it. Last week, for instance, a lot of anti-fascist slogans appeared on the factory walls. Unpremeditated action. "Oh, you people, when we get started..." The men were impatient, he understood them so well, he had lived their life... He had known his father only at the age of nine, when the latter returned from the front. His mother, a thin, sickly woman, spoke disparagingly of him. "He doesn't care about us, he's always had other things in his head... Don't be like him, Ghiță." But she refused to tell him how exactly he should be. Yet, at night, when he woke up, he heard her praying: "Oh God, bring him back, bring him to me..."

His mother went out as a laundress, she was never at home. He had no regular meals, being always in a hurry to go back to his games, and was left to grow up in the street. In the morning he would queue up for bread and return, all black and blue, because everybody pinched him to prevent him from taking their turn. Before he got home, he would gobble up half of the loaf, but his mother

was away, so there was nobody there to scold him. He had become a thorough bully, had beaten up a great many boys older than himself. One day the Roman Catholic priest in the neighbourhood took him aside, brought him into the church and talked a long time to him. He told him that his mother was working the nails off her fingers, that his father was fighting at the front for the Emperor,* that he was a big boy now — seven — and would soon go to school. He described his poor mother's sufferings so pathetically, that Gheorghe burst into tears. In the end the priest told him, he too could earn some money, if he came every day and cleaned the little church. He would give him all the coppers in the alms boxes.

When he brought home the first money, his mother began to cry and said: "Oh, may God only help you to save enough money before the autumn, to buy yourself boots, to be able to go to school!"

The next day Gheorghe asked the priest what he thought about it: did he think he could lay aside so much money? The priest, a short fattish, bald-headed man with thick red lips, patted him on the head, asked him to his house, where he made him chop wood, gave him a large plateful of duck's soup, and told him he could ring the bell on Sundays, and if he came oftener to help him with the housework, he would give him ten *kreutzer* every time.

Gheorghe was happy. Only the elder children teased him and followed him about, shouting:

"Gyuri has become a servant to the old bugger! He! he! Miss Gyuri..."

He had not the faintest idea what "bugger" meant. Father Joseph was so kind! He called him more and more often to his house, gave him holy pictures and showed him thick books where you could see God, the angels, the saints and the Mother of God, all of them naked. While Gheorghe looked at the pictures, the priest fussed around him, stroking the back of his neck, his chest, and kissing him. At night, Gheorghe thought: 'If I had a father, that's how he would be!' And he would have liked his

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*** Transylvania was at the time a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire**

real father never to come back, and his mother to marry Father Joseph. At Easter, the priest told him to call at his house, because he'd bought him a shirt and new drawers. The shirt was white and seemed to be exactly his size, and the drawers had a slit with small white buttons. The priest forced him to undress; the moment Gheorghe was admiring himself in the looking-glass, he flung himself at him and bit his shoulder and then his lips.

Half dead with terror, Gheorghe began to scream as though knifed and, tearing himself free from the priest's hands, he ran down the streets, weeping and howling. At the street corner he knocked against Uncle Horváth, a neighbour, a worker in the arms factory near the station. He used to come to their place, and always brought them something: a bit of sugar, a lump of margarine for him to eat. Amidst his sobs, he told him what had happened to him: the priest had wanted to eat him. Horváth went red in the face (he was a little tight). He took him to a shop where he bought him half a pound of sweets, and, holding him tight by the hand, went to the priest who was pottering about the flowers in his little garden. They started to quarrel and horror-stricken Gheorghe saw how Horváth began to beat up the priest. He hit him mercilessly wherever he could. This cheered the boy up, and he began to laugh. After that, when they turned back home, he told him dejectedly that the priest had bought him a shirt and a pair of drawers.

"Come with me!" Uncle Horváth had shouted.

He took him home, ordered his wife to look for something and Gheorghe found himself the owner of a black jacket as long as a greatcoat. Later on, he began to attend school, and during the summer they apprenticed him at a dairy. The dairyman was a hard and cruel man whom all children were afraid of. Therefore Gheorghe was very much surprised when Mr. Küllös asked him.

"Listen, kid, how much milk can you drink?"

"Oh," said the delighted Gheorghe, "one of those big buckets full."

"Can you really?"

"I bet I can."

"Let me see you do it. But you know, kiddie dear, all, all of it, otherwise..." and Mr. Küllös frowned. He drank about four pints, till he felt he was going to burst. After this, he was sick for a week, he thought he would vomit his soul out. When he turned up ashen-faced at his job, Mr. Küllös told him:

"Well, now I think you'll never want to steal milk from me, kid."

And indeed, Gheorghe couldn't bear the smell of milk without feeling ready to puke. This was Mr. Küllös' method with all his apprentices: he disgusted them for ever of milk, and thus saved the risk of any loss.

Gheorghe learned a lot of things: how much water one must pour in, that the milk should still look like milk, how sweet-cream should be mixed with chalk powder... He got up every morning at four, ran to the dairy, then at seven to school, and at one o'clock back to the dairy.

Then the revolution broke out. The workers had organized a red guard in the district, and Gheorghe used to run away from home, to warm himself at the fires lit in the middle of the road. One day he was just returning from school, he saw a crowd of ragged men, women and children thronging to break open the doors of the big house of Baron Földessy who owned the great ironmongery in the centre of the town. He squeezed in among them and was almost lifted off his feet, the same as the sentinel who kept shouting: "Stop, comrades, stop!"

The people broke open the doors of the pantries and started carrying away the bags of flour, the large tins of fat, the vegetable and fruit preserves. Some threw chairs out of the windows, wardrobes, clothes. In the crush he managed to get hold of a silk dress and, pressing it tight to his chest, he ran home to take it to his mother. But she beat him and ordered him to go by night and throw it into the Peţa. Gheorghe couldn't bring himself to do it, he hid it in the wood-shed, in an old chest.

Then came the Rumanians and the French. Uncle Horváth was arrested together with lots of neighbours and workers. Mr. Küllös shut up his dairy. There was no possibility for him to get any work. At the station, for

instance, grown-up people jostled with one another to get the passengers' luggage to carry — for one or two lei.

His mother grew weaker and weaker. She died one winter, and they buried her with the money scraped together with great pains by Horváth just back from prison. He couldn't think of going to school, and they wouldn't hire him at the factory. He ran wild with the boys who picked up cigarette butts, and smoked them under the bridge. At night Gheorghe would cry, silently, lest Uncle Horváth, who had enough troubles of his own, should hear him.

In 1924, one night, knocks on the window were heard, and a thick voice called:

"Hey, Pista! Open the door!"

Horváth got up muttering, lit the lamp, opened the door and in came a tall, powerful man with a thick black moustache. He was dressed in a blue coat that reached down to his heels. Horváth took a step back, then fell on his neck.

"Mihai! Is that you, Mihai?... Gheorghe! Get up, Gheorghe! Your father's come."

Gheorghe came shyly nearer, and the man with the sunburnt and weather-beaten face hugged him with all his might, crushing his face against the rugged coat which smelt of tobacco and sweat. They talked till morning, and during those hours Gheorghe heard more things than he had ever heard in his whole lifetime. He gathered that his father had been a soldier in an army called, goodness knows why, red (perhaps because it had shed the blood of many enemies), that he had stayed there all the time and had come home now...

Uncle Horváth listened, drinking in his words. Gheorghe was annoyed that he didn't quite understand everything.

"And you say you saw him?" Horváth asked.

"As I see you. At Petrograd... And once at the front."

"Well, we've been beaten," Horváth sighed. "And I was imprisoned at Cluj..."

"But nobody could beat them," said Mihai Jurca in a thick voice. "That's all that counts." He turned towards Gheorghe and put a hand on his shoulder: "Well, lad... my boy..."

From that day on Gheorghe's life changed. They moved into their little cottage; Mihai pegged away for a week until he put it right. Gheorghe would have liked him to tell him about things, but somehow he felt shy of this man whom he didn't remember. His father bought him books, some clothes, and sent him to school. He helped him with his lessons, and it was astonishing how many things he knew, especially in geography. Gheorghe learned to know another love than his mother's tearful affection. His father spoke to him as to a man. Through his eyes, Gheorghe learned to know the world and its sufferings, he learned that workers must not expect anything from anybody, but fight in order to get the power into their hands. At sixteen, when he entered the factory, his father explained to him, in a manner he could understand, what capital and plus value were. He advised him to read the papers, and they used to talk about international politics. Every night workers from the factory came to their place and they went on talking till late into the night. Gheorghe was happy when he saw how the others listened to his father, at the time president of the trade union. Often Mihai Jurca had to calm down the impetuosity of some discontented youngster.

"No, brother, now we must organize, close our ranks. Yes! We must put a stop to all disagreements between workers! Our time is coming, don't you worry!"

Gheorghe began to work as a member of the U.T.C. (Union of Communist Youth). At first he had a task in the football team of a workers' club, then in the choir. In 1929, when half of the workers were discharged, the strike broke out. The police arrested a lot of people among whom his father and Uncle Horváth. The unemployed workers spent their whole time at the station or in the park, playing cards. Some of the weaker ones out of spite molested better dressed passers-by, and women as well. The police had sent out *agents provocateurs*; they would have liked to seize the whole party committee. From the social-democrats came the rumour that the strike ought not to have been called. They were trying to set the workers against the communists who were to blame for the workers' unemployment: it was said that the management had

been obliged to take those steps until the crisis was over. Gheorghe Jurca tried to hold a meeting with the unemployed, but he did not know what to tell them, and in the end some hooligans beat him up. That night, he cried with rage like a child: "What, even the workers refuse to understand and let themselves led by the nose by the bourgeoisie?"

During those days the party mobilized all the active workers, the U.T.C. and the red trade union. The workers who had been kept on in the factory gave up a quarter of their salary to help the unemployed. They organized a sort of canteen in an eating-shop: with the help of some actors, they gave performances at night in the park. Gheorghe was set the task of discovering and isolating the *agents provocateurs* in the pay of the secret police.

It is then he met Iulia Vlad, the secretary of the district committee. She had been a student at Cluj, but they had expelled her from the University; after that, a textile worker, for some time, a schoolmistress in the village of Gai, after which she had had to go in hiding, having been discovered. Gheorghe had often heard about her; he had fancied her to be tall, mannish, with a booming bass voice, and was therefore somewhat disappointed when he saw her for the first time. She was a thin woman, looking very nervous, and sometimes unexpectedly shy. She looked more like a student, or some minor office clerk. He kept in touch with her for nearly two months; during that time he was set the task of smuggling out of prison the writings of a comrade who had been brought there from Aiud. One evening, while they were reading them together, Jurca marvelled how many things that man knew, who, he had heard, had been in prison for nearly nine years. Iulia looked at him reproachfully.

"D'you know, Gheorghe, I've been wanting to tell you this for a long time. It seems to me that you, on the contrary, know too little ... Just think, you might be set a task in which you'll have to prove more than your technical ability. For instance, to establish a liaison with a group of intellectuals. What then?"

"We'll learn more when we'll have overthrown the bourgeoisie," he answered rather sullenly.

"And d'you think you'll have more time then?"

His father was tried and sentenced to four months' imprisonment; as he had been committed to prison three months before the trial, he soon returned home as jolly as ever.

"A bit of leave doesn't do a workman any harm."

Gheorghe was now a full-grown man; he looked old for his age, and once his father asked him if he didn't want to get married.

"No," he answered. "There's no time for that sort of thing now. All our forces..."

"Ho, ho," laughed the old man." Look at that the chicken is cleverer than the hen. Suit yourself, Gheorghiță. Some time you're sure to fall in love..."

Gheorghe couldn't tell him he was in love with Iulia Vlad. He couldn't tell that to anybody, and in front of her he did his utmost to hide his feelings. Iulia was married; her husband had three more years to do at Doftana.

Later, at a ball, he made the acquaintance of Luci Gherdan. She was a clerk at the town hall, a small jolly girl with a snub nose, and brown childish eyes. They met every day, walked along the bank till nightfall, and when darkness came on, started kissing. She was very ignorant and listened in surprise when he began talking to her about the new world that would be built some time, when people would be happy. Her artlessness enraptured him: Luci enjoyed everything he told her, and looked at him admiringly. One day she asked him to their house. There was nobody in, and she seemed so stirred up by his presence, that Gheorghe lost his head. He took her in his arms, felt her body trembling, burning-hot. She put her arms round his neck and whispered into his ear:

"Don't be unkind... I love you so much... What will you think of me now?"

Later on she started weeping:

"Now you won't love me any more. I know you'll say to yourself: 'she is a bad woman.' I'm so fond of you, Gheorghe, and I'm so anxious. I'm afraid they might, God forbid, shut you up... You... there are nasty things being said about you all."

He closed her mouth with his lips.

They met again several times at her house. One night he said to the old man:

"I may be getting married."

"Excellent!" answered Jurca.

Luci became more and more affectionate. She wanted to know everything about him, and Gheorghe began to tell her about his childhood about his harassed life.

"Oh, don't let anything happen to you," she said very alarmed. "Why? Aren't you afraid? You get together like that... when it's forbidden?"

He laughed.

One night Horváth came to him. He went straight to Gheorghe and began to shout:

"Splendid, my boy! Fine work! What? How could you have been such a simpleton?... You've taught him well," he said turning towards Uncle Jurca.

"But what's happened?" Gheorghe stammered.

Horváth, enraged, charged him with having got entangled like a fool, with the sister of a police officer, a well-known woman *agent provocateur*, Luci Gherdan, who pretended to be innocence personified.

His father jumped to his feet and asked him sharply:

"What did you tell her?"

Turning scarlet, Gheorghe had to remember all that he had let out. For safety's sake, suspecting that he was beeing shadowed, he was exempted from all activity for some time. When, later on, he met Iulia Vlad, she squeezed his hand sadly.

"It's hard, isn't it? They've poisoned relations between people..."

That night he tossed about for hours on his bed, concealing his sighs for fear the old man might hear him. His father didn't sleep either. He lit the lamp and, taking a blanket, sat on the edge of the bed.

"I'm not sleepy," he said, "and my rheumatism is troubling me." And, as if he were telling a story to a child, he told him about the revolution, about the fights he had been in while in the Red Army, together with tens of thousands of prisoners from the former Austrian army.

Then life took up its usual course again. Iulia's husband, Gavril, came back from prison. He was a very cheerful and restless fellow, who knew a great many poems he was very proud of. In 1936 he left for Spain together with

others. Gheorghe was doing his last year of military service at Bîrlad.

After that so many things happened. The legionary* dictatorship, the factory swarming with all kinds of ruffians in green shirts, the war... In 1941 Gheorghe had to begin underground work because he had been discovered by an agent, Lövy, whom Holtzmann — recently arrived from Cluj — had unmasked. From morning till night, all his time was taken up. He had grown so used to these actions of which one alone, if discovered, would have been enough to send him before the firing squad, that it seemed to him he had done nothing else his whole life. After his departure, it was his father who led the shock and sabotage squad in the militarized factory. Iulia Vlad was ill. For a year she hadn't left her bed. A military surgeon, whom they had discovered in the station and brought to see her, had diagnosed cancer. Gheorghe Jurca tried to keep this from her, but she knew and smiled sadly every time he tried to encourage her.

Now, indeed, it would not be long. The Soviet Army was at Jassy, the time for open action was nearing.

Shivering with cold, Jurca drew the blanket back over the window. He walked on tiptoe to his bed and lay down. He tried to think of tomorrow's meeting with Murgescu, of his lisping, effeminate voice, of the text of the leaflets which were to be distributed the next day in the factories of the town. Where would the workers' guards drill ? Still his thoughts went back to Iulia, that woman full of life, with her short ruffled hair, lively eyes and curling lashes. Her husband had been in the camp at Drancy together with those of the International Brigade, then had escaped and entered the *maquis*, and they had had no more news from him. Blinking the whole time with fatigue, Jurca thought of Iulia Vlad, as they all knew her, always full of confidence, enterprise and courage, and he found it hard to believe that the woman who was dying on the wooden bed in the next room had been up to the beginning of last year the secretary of the district committee of the Communist Party, and now had no place of her own to die in.

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* See note page 22

The prefect, General Laurențiu Belega, felt he would not be able to bear the strain of the life he had been leading lately. He signed any paper that was put before him, granted audiences and listened absent-mindedly to people's complaints, endeavouring to put on an air of concern. Now, after the landing in France of the British and American forces he was sure the Germans had lost the war. Some time before, like all the Rumanians, he had prophesied the defeat of the Axis powers, but only when in company, as if it were one of the demands of society life. He almost regretted that, owing to his old friendship with Marshal Antonescu, he had been appointed prefect instead of being sent to the front. Things there were far simpler.

The news about the arrival of the German Commission had quite upset him. He had tried to get in touch with Bucharest, but the ministries had scattered to Brașov, to Herculane or to the dickens knew where. The Marshal was continually at the front — at least that's what he was told — so that he didn't know what to do. No one had come to inquire about his opinion, or at least to let him know what was going on. Therefore, in despair, he had taken a step which he afterwards regretted. He had gone and had a talk with Baron Romulus Papp of Zerind. He had admitted several members of the former National-Peasant party, to work at the local branch of the "Banca Romînească," on the board of directors of the "Astra" and even at the prefecture. The baron had been delighted and had declared that he valued him highly, that he had the greatest respect for the tact he was showing in the management of the affairs of the district in such troubled times.

The thing that always made the general nervous in his intercourse with the baron was the fact that he tried in vain to look at him humbly or beseechingly, or only slightly suggestive; Papp's glance remained the same: yellowish and indifferent. As for his answer, when he gave it, it could be interpreted in a hundred ways. On leaving, the general, who was fuming inwardly, addressed him openly:

"You know about the German Commission in town, don't you?"

"I?" the baron said, in astonishment, forcing himself to assume the air of a man dropped from the blue, but at the same time, by the twist of his thin lips, to insinuate that he was not quite so ignorant. "I? I believe I've heard something, but I didn't give it any importance. I'm an old man..."

"Well, and what is your opinion?"

"I don't go in for politics," Baron Papp smiled with an old man's kindness. "I don't go in for politics. Come and see my garden, I've planted some Japanese apple-trees..."

The general had bowed stiffly, raising his hand soldier-like to the peak of his cap. Perhaps the austerity of this salute possessed something that impressed Papp. He saw the general to the door and told him as he laid a hand on his heavy golden shoulder-piece:

"Listen, General!" (the baron spoke old-fashioned Rumanian, with a strong Transylvanian accent, to mark his hostility towards the vulgar suburban accent of people belonging to the 'old kingdom'. "As I had the honour of telling you before, I don't meddle in matters that do not concern me. I have done my duty, it is time for others to do theirs. I nevertheless must tell you something, and I trust to your discretion. In case something should happen, let us say an essential change in the whole course of the affairs of the country, there is but one man, the way I see it, able to hold the reins... the Marshal. The army follows him, the people fear him because he likes order. '*Ordnung*'! Do you understand? Now, the wisdom, which we have more than once shown, compels us to remember this. Now farewell. Your call has been an honour to me. I am but a poor old man... The younger generations don't excel in gratitude. Good-bye!"

After this talk the prefect was uneasy for a long time. He understood only too well that the baron had not lifted his mask in front of him in vain, that, when he excused himself with his senility and his lack of understanding of the new things, he had been only bluffing; he knew for sure — had he not a fairly good intelligence service! — that the baron was in permanent touch with Bucharest, and, if he had said that the National-Peasant party trusted the Marshal to direct the new policy, that was sure to be

a fact. 'If only the Marshal wouldn't set himself against it!' Belega worried, thinking of the latter's unexpected, almost insane outbursts.

But he recalled with a sigh of relief the Marshal's attitude after the rebellion. After all, Antonescu had worn the green shirt*, which hadn't prevented him in the least from... turning against the Iron Guard.

*

Although he had been recommended complete discretion, Salvator Varga could not refrain from telling his family about the deadlock in which he was struggling. It was a tradition: whenever one of the children was ill, all the relations were asked to have their say in favour of this physician or that; the same happened when a decision had to be taken about an important demand from the refugees' committee or if George's behaviour in Bucharest had to be commented on. As long as Mrs. Hortensia, the grandmother, had lived, her word had been law and the final decision. All her sons had a blind, almost superstitious faith in her rigid and implacable common sense, while the crude language she used, without the least regard for the children who were present, gave to her utterances something final. But she had died of sorrow and cirrhosis a short time after the ceding of Transylvania, and her likely opinion was invoked with much reticence in moments when the discussion reached a deadlock. But now the clan had dispersed: George, the eldest brother, was in Bucharest, a technical councillor in the Ministry of Trade, Crișan, the youngest, had been for some time a member of the staff commanding in Transnistria, and they had had no news from him for some time. Varga was obliged to talk at length, in order to get his thoughts clear, in front of his wife who stared at him with a look of horror on her mealy face, in front of Lucian whose thoughts wandered and of Teddie who approved him noisily, marvelling how he was able to face so many complications, and wondering if he might touch him for some money after lunch. In the icy atmosphere, which descended on

* The members of the Rumanian fascist movement, the Iron Guard, wore a green shirt

them during the dessert and coffee, Varga felt obliged to encourage those from whom he expected support.

"Everything will be all right in the end, I'm sure! Don't you worry!"

"Salvator — his wife looked at him beseechingly — wouldn't it be better for us to go away, though ?"

"Tut, tut," said Varga pretending he was annoyed. He then quieted down suddenly: "You know what? You go away, my dears. Don't be afraid about me. I'd even feel quieter, freer..."

"No!" exclaimed Mrs. Varga, pressing her thin colourless lips together till they became a narrow line, like her eyes. "No!"

Varga did not insist. He stepped up to her and kissed her hand tenderly and respectfully, then went and locked himself up in the library to prepare the brief of a case which was due to be tried at the Court of Appeal: a tailor had been denounced by his wife for listening to the B. B. C. However, he didn't feel like doing any work, he only wanted to be alone, though he knew he would not be able to stand it for a long time. The daily sittings at Papp's house had become regular hell, even for a man as versatile as he was. The leading staff had divided into two camps: one which, willy-nilly, he had to represent (it was the consequence of the stand he had taken the day when he had heard of the arrival of the mysterious commission, of whose existence he was less and less certain), which rallied Father Potra, headmaster Lucaci and, with a certain tactical reserve, Guiașiu. The other one, by far the more violent, consisted of Emil P. D. Motzeanu, Dr. Remus Pordea, Nicușor Spinanțiu and Professor Silviu Burtea. They held that it was a crime to undertake anything before learning the definite opinion or getting instructions from the centre. Yet none of them could make up their minds to go to Bucharest or Călimănești and bring back an answer. One evening, when they were leaving, Baron Papp had kept Varga back and told him straight out that he considered the latter's attitude to be fully in accordance with the present interests of the party, but that age prevented him from taking his side openly. This encouraged Varga. The following day he began to bawl, accusing the others of

a disloyal attitude, but Motzeanu put him out of countenance with one single question bellowed out venomously, his chin resting on his chest:

"Quite, quite! Good and well! But what exactly are we to do?"

"Start an action!" Varga answered with assurance and superiority.

"May I ask what this action would consist of?" Spinanţiu grinned, underlining his sarcasm.

Varga lost his head. At that moment he remembered Fritsch, the concentration camps and all the calamities of the present. He gasped: he noticed the meaning glances Motzeanu had cast at the baron.

"I believe," Varga had exclaimed, "we might propose to Vîslan to publish an ambiguous article in which he should alarm..."

"Whom, Salvator?" guffawed Motzeanu. "Whom? It will alarm people, I grant it, Vîslan will be arrested, this you must grant; and then they will find out who started this 'idea.' The rest you can figure out for yourself. No, on no account! Not for the world!"

Varga began to hate the baron. What was he actually driving at? It was a thing as plain as a pikestaff that Germany had lost the war. What then? He couldn't tell; he neither knew nor understood anything, but this he could admit to nobody. He told himself that this role was terrible and unbearable, and he thought of a story by Andersen which he used to read to the children when they were small: an emperor had clothes made for him, the beauty of which could not he appreciated by fools and by those who usurped roles for which they were not fitted. The consequence was that nobody wanted to confess that he could see nothing. What if all this business were but an invisible cloak? He felt he would like to howl. He said to himself: 'What do I care about this factory? Let them take it to hell if they want to, to Germany or Patagonia or Cochinchina, for all I care.' He hadn't the faintest idea what ought to be done, he knew only one thing: he couldn't run away, for it would be equal to political suicide, and though he could not picture what tomorrow's political life would look like, he understood all the same that

times were coming when it would be necessary not to be isolated, to be sure of the support of a powerful party with a long historic tradition. As for him, he could only think of proverbs and sayings which made him mad: politics is a dirty job; in for a penny, in for a pound; you can't hunt with the hounds and run with the hare; an acre for every man...

*

Lucian looked at his watch. As usual, he had come a quarter of an hour too early. He was to meet Sonia in a quiet little street with old-fashioned, ornate houses. When waiting for her he was never weary. He tried to imagine the peaceful life inside those houses, the winter nights when families seated round the table, played dominoes under the soft light of a shaded lamp. He did not know very well if those pictures of family life had ever existed and if they existed today... Every day at five o'clock an old maid wearing a large straw hat appeared at one of the windows of the house; she put a cushion on the window-sill and stood there, watching calmly and sadly at the passers-by, or rather at the little street where only things beyond time could happen. Though his friendship with Sonia was so recent, Lucian sometimes felt anew the sensation of plenitude he had experienced when he had discovered Andrei. They talked of heaps of things, but far more simply, and it seemed that in her presence everything he had read acquired a new significance.

He saw her coming and began to walk in the opposite direction. She must not see that he had been waiting for her. But he was listening to the light noise her heels were making. Sonia laid her hand on his shoulder and asked him, laughing:

"Tell me, why did you pretend not to have seen me?"

Lucian went all red and mumbled something, but Sonia went on gaily:

"Andrei does the same. In society he always 'sees' me last."

"Probably out of delicacy," whispered Lucian.

He was awfully ashamed.

"You know, this is a falsehood, all the same; it's dissembling. Why should I be ashamed of looking forward to seeing somebody, or waiting for somebody? Look, today I could hardly wait to meet you."

"Really?"

"I wanted to tell you the great news: 'that' doctor is leaving for the country."

"I'm so glad, Sonia."

"So'm I... I could shout with joy..." She took his arm. "Let's walk briskly."

'Lucky nobody sees me,' Lucian thought. 'I must look very ridiculous. Well, and if? Who cares?'

"He came to us today to say good-bye. He hinted I was the cause of his exile." She laughed and shook her head. "D'you know what? He can go... to the devil!" They walked on in silence for some time.

"Tell me, which was the greatest joy you ever experienced in your life?" Sonia asked him unexpectedly. "Tell me straight out, don't stop to think."

"I don't know, I really can't say," Lucian answered after some time. "You probably asked me, so as to be able to tell me yourself, didn't you?"

"No, or rather yes, you've guessed. Don't you think the last joy is always the greatest?" She frowned. "I always feel like that. Mother says that shows I'm not serious. Now let's have an ice-cream. But, you know, I pay for mine."

They went into a small confectioner's. It was crowded. The moment he sat down at a small round table with a marble top, Lucian felt like laughing: it was the first time that he was alone in a shop with a girl. He looked at her. She had done her hair up in a tight knot which showed the sunburnt back of her neck.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

He gulped, then said in a voice he didn't recognize:

"You're lovely, Sonia!"

Sonia tightened her lips, the blue of her eyes grew deeper. She didn't answer him. She hastened to finish her ice, and rose. She seemed embarrassed and kept silent until they parted.

"Have I said anything to make you angry?" Lucian asked in a quavering voice.

She shook his hand as a boy would do, and looking him straight in the eyes, asked him:

"If I asked you to come to the park tomorrow at four o'clock, would you have the courage to come out in such heat?"

"Why?"

"I've got an idea," she said awkwardly, winking at him. "A daring idea."

"All right. I'll come."

That night, when all had gone to bed, he went out on the balcony. He leaned against the cold rough balustrade. 'I love her,' he told himself, and was surprised to realize how little this astonished him. He closed his eyes and hid his face in the palm of his right hand which she had pressed. He stayed like that, restless, then turned and went into his room.

It seemed to him that at the end of a journey he had got somewhere... And tomorrow he would tell her... Just 'dear Sonia' would be enough... 'dear Sonia'...

He could not get a wink of sleep, the whole night. Neither could he read anything. The next day, though dead tired, he didn't budge from his mother's side, worrying her with all kinds of questions, asking her to speak to him about anything. He didn't want to be alone, to think of her. About four he dressed hurriedly, chose a gay tie out of Teddie's wardrobe and ran out of the house. It was very hot, the asphalt was soft and stuck to the soles of one's shoes. The anaemic shadows of the trees were sprawling along the pavement. When he turned towards the park, he was struck by the pleasant vegetal freshness and the slimy smell of the Mureş. From here everything looked like an oasis, but, as soon as he came nearer, the delusion vanished: the big leaves of the chestnut-trees were covered with dust; only the flowers watered with the hose, were lifting their scarlet muzzles out of their grassy beds.

Sonia was waiting for him. She hadn't seen him yet. She was wearing a white print frock, with big green dented leaves. She was fanning herself with a rubber swimming-cap. He called to her:

"Sonia!"

"So you've come? Are you angry?"

"No... why?"

"Because I dragged you out of the house. I don't know how you'll like my idea."

('If she hadn't spoken... if she hadn't said a word... Only her glance ought to have...')

"You won't guess what it's all about." She left him no time to answer, and took him by the hand. "Let's go bathing! If you won't come, I'll drag you there and push you into the water, as you are. Come on. The Mureș is transparent. It is a crime to be dressed in weather like this."

"Sonia!" he tried to protest.

"Nothing doing... you're a bear. You'll find a bathing-suit in the cabin."

Still holding him by the hand, she pulled him down the steps of the dyke and made him get himself a ticket.

"Wait for me here!" Sonia made him stop on the sandy beach. "I'll be back in no time."

She went into a yellow cabin. Lucian, listlessly, took several steps until he heard a shout:

"Good Heavens! *Fata morgana*! An optical delusion!" Teddie tore himself away from a group of boys and girls (their gang of fools, of ignoramuses, of nude people!) and bowed low to him...

"Is it an apparition?"

"Don't be an ass," Lucian growled turning pale.

But Teddie began to hop around him, hung on his shoulders, ruffled his hair.

"I knew she'd bring you along! I could have betted... Marvellous! In ten minutes' time you'll be swimming like Johnny Weissmüller?"

He hurried away yelling and jumped into the water.

'I knew she'd succeed! So everything was only a bet.' He felt his eyes filling with tears.

"Lucian! Haven't you undressed yet?"

Sonia stopped near him and began to play in the sand with her foot.

"So I haven't succeeded..." she said sadly. "I wanted to get you out of your nasty loneliness."

"*Beata solitudo, sola beatitudo*," said Lucian attempting a smile. He held out his hand to her. "Don't bother about

me. Don't worry." He did not mind that his words sounded foolish.

"Lucian... Andrei has written me," she whispered embarrassed.

"I'm glad of it, Sonia... for you, for him, for all this wide world."

"Lucian! What's the matter with you?" she asked anxiously. "We are friends, aren't we? Let's be sincere then."

"Yes, we are good friends, Sonia. The best friends possible."

He turned suddenly and ran off. In the street he realized that the rare passers-by were turning to look at him, and he stopped. Sweat was running down his forehead and the back of his neck. When he came to a standstill, exhausted, he was in the main street, deserted too at this time of the day. Only from the town hall somebody beckoned to him. He could not make out who it was, and looked about him for a place to hide. Then he saw the steps of the Catholic cathedral. In the shade of a pillar a beggar was paring his toe-nails with a penknife. Lucian hurried up the granite steps. He went in. The cold stuffy air enveloped him like a wet shirt. The cathedral was very long, shaped like a ship. In the altar a solitary priest, dressed in immaculate white vestments, was raising his arms towards the vault, in a gesture of mechanical entreaty; he took three steps to the left, sketching a genuflexion, rose and went up to the table covered by a broad strip of lace. There was nobody except the two of them. A golden-greenish light filtered through the stained-glass windows. In its neat meshes the air seemed to be alive, full of an infinity of creatures struggling there as though caught in a storm, tremendous if compared to their size... The silence surged like water. And suddenly a nameless peace began to flow into him and rock him, and, when under the high vaults the solemn booming chords of a hidden organ began to flutter, he knelt down. His knee-caps hit against the cement floor. He could not pray; he felt himself a child again, scared and entranced by the solemn silence around him; he closed himself in a shell spiritually, attempting to catch and keep the peace of renunciation and return for ever...

He did not realize how long he had stayed like that; when he looked up, the priest had left the altar and the sounds of the organ had died down. He was alone and almost frightened. There was nobody with whom he could share, by his glances at least, the light he felt inside him. He remembered Father Potra, not his pointed face with the burning eyes consumed with grief, but some words he had told him resignedly one day.

"Why do you avoid me, my dear boy?"

He would go to him, he needed it. He started without asking himself if the priest was at home or not. He walked along happily, unaware of everything surrounding him.

Father Potra had guided his steps when he was a child. He had just come back from Rome, and had so many things to say of the marvels there; he showed him photographs of the Vatican, the Sixtine Chapel, the downfall of the faithless in Hell, the God of wrath and of revenge as seen by Michelangelo, Raphael's madonnas. The Varga family was religious; that is why Father Potra was always very welcome to their house; it was said that he would go far. Lucian remembered how on a winter afternoon, when the cold north wind was blowing outside, flinging the drifting snow against the window-panes, he was lying on the carpet listening to a story by Cezar Petrescu about two children freezing in the snow. The fire was roaring in the stove. He had been ashamed of their wealth at the time; he would have liked to be able to call those two children into the house, to give them his toys, his very best clothes, even his pop-gun. Father Potra's voice was grave and gentle, and Lucian had burst into tears, cuddling up to his chest. When he quieted down, Father Potra had said to him:

"My dear boy, never forget there are so many suffering people. Help them. Give up a sweet, a cake, to bring some joy into the sorrowful lives of some to whom God has given less."

And a long time after, Lucian had not been able to pass by a beggar without giving him a penny. If he had none to give, he felt guilty.

Then had come his friendship with Andrei. The latter had mocked at his faith, had opposed to it his vitality,

his constantly restless mind, always seeking for something. 'Seeking for whom?' Lucian wondered now. 'When everything is so simple! So simple that you can tell nobody what you have discovered. Everybody must mount this calvary.' He smiled gently: 'Yesterday I'd have been horrified and ashamed of such thoughts; I would have thought them childish.'

Father Potra had warned him several times to beware of Andrei whom he couldn't bear.

"He's like good cheese in a rotten packing," Father Potra would say spitefully, unable to imagine that a boy at the top of the form, so clever and well-read, could be such a mischief-maker. Once when Andrei was at Lucian's, Father Potra had come too. Andrei was rude, he declared that Goethe had said somewhere that only stupid people ought to be modest, because they have a good reason for it.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit..." said the priest reproachfully.

"I thank you most humbly, but I don't hanker after such blessedness," Andrei broke out laughing. "I swear, I don't."

'Yes, Father Potra is rather limited,' Lucian said to himself while crossing the big market with its sun-heated stalls. He stopped short: 'Do I know what the limited and the unlimited is?' He went on with his reasoning much more cautiously this time. 'Father Potra is as he is, perhaps somewhat strict, like anyone who has renounced life's joys. But near him, I felt calmer, more at peace than with Andrei with his eternal paradoxical dissatisfactions, his eternal quest for... for what? He didn't know himself. He does not know and he's unhappy.'

He arrived at Father Potra's. The latter laid in a two-storeyed house, where he had a small flat. All the furniture consisted of a huge book-case, an iron bed-stead, a writing-table, two chairs, a night-table, a wireless set, a praying desk with an ebony crucifix on which the yellow ivory body of a Christ pierced by a spear was laid out.

He rang the bell.

He heard Potra's light step and, the instant the latter opened the door, Lucian lifted up to him a face transfigured by emotion.

"I've come... I've come... Father..."

Potra was silent, then he understood and whispered: "Praised be our Lord Jesus Christ... Come in."

*

That morning, the large workshop was as full of noise as usual.

The din was so great that questions had to be shouted.

"Petre! What have you brought as a snack?"

"Dog's fat and a white corn cake."

Horváth stopped the dirty lathe, round which heaps of bluish and purple shavings lay piled up, and lit a cigarette, taking his time to do so. He inhaled the first smoke as usual into the depth of his lungs, then coughed with satisfaction. His neighbour, Petre Gribău, a smallish, hollow-cheeked lad, laughed at him.

"What's the matter, pal?"

"Nothing, nothing at all! Let the machine have a rest too, it's been droning enough in my head."

Cracking jokes, Horváth looked right and left. The foreman Filoftei had not been on his round yet, so that he couldn't start his work. He thought, thrilled by deep satisfaction: 'This moment, at the "Teba," the "Indagrara," the leaflets are being distributed. Now we'll see who gets the upper hand!' He looked at Petre who was digging disgustedly with his tool in the lathe carrier.

"You don't seem to be doing too much either!" he exclaimed harshly, but his eyes twinkled with laughter.

"Of course I am!" the other answered in the same tone, searching his overall pockets for a cigarette. "How can you say such a thing?"

Someone at the entrance whistled shrilly, and all set to work. Looking at the ogive of the shell which was turning on its axis, Horváth's eyes followed stealthily the thickset figure of the foreman. Filoftei was always dressed as though he were in his Sunday clothes. A black suit, light-brown shoes and a blue cap with ear-laps, made of cloth in winter and of cotton in summer. He strutted along in a soldierly way between the rows of lathes, while his little red eyes twinkled angrily. Horváth knew that, after the foreman

had walked like that from one end to the other, he would inevitably find fault with something, and would shout, turning as red as a lobster. Then he would threaten to court-martial them, lecture them and finally, tired and with the feeling of having accomplished his duty, would go and refresh himself at the pub across the road, "The Classical Pearl," a hovel half destroyed by a bomb, with a sign representing a necklace of pearls as large as plums and dyed in the national colours: red, yellow and blue.

He heard him roar, and the creaking of the iron door covered for a moment all the other noises. Then Horváth stopped his lathe. He opened the small case in which he kept his food and his tools and, bending low, pulled the pile of papers out and quickly shoved it under his smock. After waiting a while, he pretended to be furious that his lathe had stopped, and got out by the back door. He walked hurriedly, watching if anyone saw him, and went into the cloakroom — a passage closed up at both ends by a wooden partition, where small iron chests were lined up. Horváth had prepared a door opener. He stood for several moments listening to the beating of his heart, then quickly opened the small chests one after the other and put into each a sheet of rough packing-paper. At first, his fingers, as if benumbed, refused to obey; then, when he had reached the first half, he felt his back drenched with sweat. When he finished, he felt as if several hours of hard, intense work had elapsed. He went out quickly, stopped at the privy, and from there went out into the yard, where he exchanged a few words with Folker, an elderly worker; he finally returned to the workshop, that was half empty by now.

For an hour after foreman Filoftei's first round, until the hour of Captain Prodan's visit, the shop was deserted; the men went to smoke and chat with those from the forges or the furnaces. 'Well,' sighed Horváth, 'this has been done too!' Bending over the lathe, he set it going and followed attentively how the shavings, coming off in spirals, twisted round the pointed top of the shell.

About four o'clock, when the brass gong in the middle of the yard was sounded for cessation of work, the workers went to the wash-room and from there to the cloakroom. Horváth was watching them breathlessly. But those on

his right and left made no move. They only slipped the paper quickly into their pockets. Only at the far end, somebody (Horváth couldn't guess whose was the shrill voice) shouted:

"What's this? Don't you hear? What's this I've found in my chest? Who's been messing about in my chest?"

Before they reached the gate where the men were searched, the leaflet had been read by all. This is what it said:

Patriots,

The destruction of Hitler's Germany is near. The Germans are aware of this and want to carry away to Germany the property of the occupied countries, to be able to continue their criminal war.

A German commission has come to the arms manufactory, and is at the present moment negotiating the dismantling of the installations and their conveyance to Hitlerite Germany.

Workers, women-workers, technicians and engineers!

Let's oppose this robbery with all our might!

Not a single engine, not one lathe must leave the factory!

The district committee of the
Rumanian Communist Party.

"Read it and pass it on!"

*

Captain Prodan, the military commander of the factory, ran up the steps leading to the managing offices, four at a time. Blind with rage and terror, he did not see where he was stepping, and at the entrance he caught his small finger in the door-handle and broke his finger-nail. Cursing under his breath, he passed in front of Miss Muclea who looked at him petrified, and entered Dărnescu's office without knocking at the door. Files lay in heaps everywhere, on tables, desks and on the floor. Avoiding them clumsily, Captain Prodan came up in front of Dărnescu's desk and held out to him the four leaflets he was holding in his clenched fist. Dărnescu lowered his brown tortoise-shell-rimmed spectacles from his high forehead, read the papers carefully, weighing every word,

then shrugged his round massive shoulders. Beneath his thin yellowish silk shirt, his large muscles wrapped in fat trembled, conveying to the silk a light tremulous movement. Prodan stared at him, puzzled. Dărnescu's big red face, covered with a web of fine veins, expressed neither astonishment nor indignation.

"I found these in the factory... Some workers handed them over to me!" Prodan said in a loud voice, hoping to attract the attention of one of the five Germans who bending attentively over the figures, plans and diagrams of the factory hadn't even looked at him.

Dărnescu sighed, rose from the leather arm-chair the back of which was wet with his abundant perspiration, and, leaning over Major Mertsch's shoulder, handed him the paper. The major fixed the monocle in his eye-socket, read the paper, went as white as chalk and jumped to his feet. The water in the bottle on the table rocked to and fro compactly.

"*Was*?" he shouted in German, and the corner of his eyebrow, parted by a deep pink scar, twitched nervously.

Dărnescu handed the leaflets to the others: Dr. Julius Ambrosius, technical expert of the German Embassy, Franz Helmuth, engineer, Aloisius Krank and Lieutenant Johann Ergenheim of the military railway-transport service. The Germans gazed at the rectangular piece of paper. Major Mertsch translated it for them, and then they began to bustle about, to exchange frightened looks, and in the end turned to Prodan. The latter tried to explain to them:

"I found this... *in der Fabrik*... *Ein Manifest!*

Dărnescu mopped his brow with a fine linen handkerchief and whistled annoyed, thinking that the ventilator had stopped. Mertsch, turning round, said something to him in a sharp and curt voice.

Dărnescu translated to Prodan:

"Did you search the workers when they left the works?"

Prodan got confused:

"Yes... yes, of course, as usual, but evidently not looking for those infamous things... the existence of which I did not suspect... but..."

"*Schweinerei!*" shrieked Ambrosius.

Prodan took this to be an insult and bent his shoulders guiltily.

Major Mertsch's top-boots creaked as he stepped over the stringed files lying on the floor to go to the telephone. He dialled a number, waited, then said in his dry voice.

"Doctor Fritsch?" He talked for several minutes so quickly that Prodan could not make out a word, then concluded with *"Heil Hitler!"*

Captain Prodan shuddered: he went pale, his eyelids fluttered terrified, like a bat's wings. 'I'm not to blame,' he said to himself. 'Not to blame in the least.' But he wasn't sure if he would get out of this impasse.

*

The same day Varga was called urgently to Baron Papp's house and told about the contents of the communist leaflet which had been distributed in town. Varga spoke, without the slightest conviction, as if he had been weary of maintaining for such a long time, a thing that was evidence itself:

"As for me, gentlemen, I had the honour to warn you. Yes, I did have this honour."

Everybody was silent. All were present except Father Potra; their countenances expressed a slightly frightened uncertainty; the others — who had always been for protesting — a mild ostentatious reproach. The baron meanwhile was calmly sipping his lemonade. Motzeanu, who had made a hearty lunch, was red and perspiring, casting on all sides puzzled looks out of his bulging eyes.

Varga spoke sadly:

"Gentlemen, the wisdom which our experience must have given us, compels us to submit to evidence and to the consequences of this evidence. Sooner or later we'll have to cope with ideas alien to us, in short — to call things by their name — with the left-wing parties.

He stopped, but nobody approved nor contradicted him. Varga felt this as an isolation and became furious. The corners of his eyes trembled slightly, and he clenched his fists. Their lack of response seemed to him unkind.

Under those circumstances he would have preferred the discussion to be accompanied by shouts, invectives and even threats, anything rather than this stupid indifference mimicking composedness and moderation. He stood and waited, the palms of his hands propped on the top of the desk, lawyer-fashion, and asking himself why he, who had his own interests to look after and a family with its inherent cares, found himself engaged in this wild-goose chase.

"Gentlemen," he said, "let us therefore consider the position seriously... (He couldn't hit upon any argument, even a sentimental one.) Willy-nilly, this incident has become a factor..."

"What's the use of so much palavering, Salvator," said Motzeanu angrily, "we do agree to this. Fact is — his eyes blinked restlessly — what are we to do?"

Varga sat down heavily, like an actor who has delivered his great cue.

"Yes, indeed, I ask you: what are we going to do?" Doctor Remus Pordea repeated like an echo.

All looked at the baron. He was turning his spoon in his glass, trying to melt the sugar at the bottom.

"Well, gentlemen, our friend Varga is right."

Like a pupil who has been praised, Varga fidgeted on his chair, then, realizing the ridicule of this attitude, hunted feverishly for a cigarette.

"Our friend Varga is right when he says that now's the time to do something. But I think Salvator was exaggerating a wee bit when he mentioned... unhistoric parties. I don't deny it, they'll spring up like mushrooms after a rain, and we'll have to take them into account, for a time at least, but they should be kept in their proper place."

"Quite true!" burst out Motzeanu.

"Right then," the baron went on, evidently delighted. "Now they have taken a kind of 'initiative'," he said tapping his small finger against the edge of the glass. "This must be taken into consideration. Therefore... — the baron stopped, watching with satisfaction the general tension — I think that if we are offered the opportunity, we might... negotiate with them."

"Beg your pardon?" Remus Pordea whispered breathlessly. He thought he hadn't heard well.

Varga looked right and left, elated and scared.

"If you will alow me," he said choosing his words cautiously, "are we to gather from this that you have already been offered such... negotiations?"

"I never say any word more than I have got to say; not one word more," declared the baron rather displeased.

He had again become the politician he used to be. He realized he had to give them some explanations, and took the piece of paper into his hand, fluttering it several times:

"You see this proclamation, don't you?" he said. "Well then, I won't say any more except that we must see what consequences it will have, and then only shall we see what there is to be done. Don't hallow before you're out of the woods."

No one talked any more about the leaflet and the factory. Much later, Nicuşor Spinanţiu rose, pursed his lips and declared:

"The Americans are advancing on Paris. I should very much like to know whether von Choltitz will declare it *ville ouverte*, as Weygand did in 1940..."

"Meanwhile — Varga said sarcastically — it seems that the Russians are preparing an offensive at Jassy."

General Mîndru — who hadn't returned to his estate but was staying at Baron Papp's — started and, cutting the air with the edge of his pink plump hand, brightened up suddenly:

"Oh, if it comes to that... then... the Carpathians, gentlemen, are an inpregnable wall, and this wall is a natural fortress which even tanks cannot cross. If it comes to resisting, give me two divisions to stop up the passes, and any offensive aiming at turning the flanks becomes utopian."

The younger ones laughed discreetly behind their hands or in their handkerchief. But Varga was wondering seriously if there wasn't at least one atom of truth in this bravado. He half wished it and half not.

*

Alexandru Suslănescu could no longer find a meaning in life. The holidays, the forced idleness, were crushing

him. When he went to Vîslan's — for he had nowhere else to go to — he looked forward to an hour or two of discussion, but, when he got there, the heat exhausted him, and his ideas became like rags. Vîslan was an uneducated man; as a matter of fact, there was nothing he could tell him.

Every day they both got drunk on rum, and Suslănescu twaddled about this beautiful life in which somewhere, he was sure, there still existed untainted ideals.

Three years before, when he came as a schoolmaster in this Transylvanian town, he ascribed his sufferings to his uprooting and his lack of didactic experience. He was afraid the boys laughed at him; every involuntary smile seemed to him directed against him, because of some mistake in pronunciation or because of his badly-cut suit. He stammered, and tears came to his eyes. Nevertheless the pupils liked him because he was young, enthusiastic and tried to make friends of them.

They liked his history lessons, as he tried to call up pregnantly the period he spoke of and its local colour. He worshipped Napoleon and had read nearly everything that had been written on him; he was familiar with the Emperor's uniforms, *le petit chapeau* and *la redingote grise*, the look of calm haughtiness of his death mask, the dignity with which he had borne the insults of coarse Sir Hudson Lowe, the love with which the be-whiskered *grognards* surrounded him. He could not speak of the end of the little corporal, without tears coming to his eyes. He also wept when recalling the death of Michael the Brave, in the chronicler's words: "And down fell his body like a tree..."

But now, every time he thought of school, he remembered one single scene: himself handing Andrei's paper over to the Head in the presence of Stan who had seized it and read it eagerly. "We'll take steps," Lucaci had muttered, but oh, the unrefrained disgust in his eyes! If they knew how fond he was of Andrei! He valued his youthful idealism, his romantic enthusiasm, the uncompromising attitude peculiar to youth. What else could he have done? What? His whole situation, his future were at stake. During the masters' council he had tried to defend

him, but nobody had taken any notice of him. The Head hardly spoke to him, he despised him. But what was more terrifying was that he didn't understand why Andrei had done that. He had not answered his letters: he too must hate him. To escape this vicious circle, he went about with Vîslan the whole time. The inveterately Bohemian ways of the editor had attracted him through their novelty, through the intoxicating sense of independence. Since he was a child he had lived with his mother and sisters. Their tales about wolves and chimney-sweeps, who came to take away naughty children, had not frightened him, rather the impressive, mysterious words: mortgage, drafts portioning out, auction sale; he was moved by the tears shed by the women among whom he grew up, over the "ancestral land falling into wrack and ruin." This tearful gentleness had told on his disposition, making him incurably shy; at high school, he had been a middling pupil, at the university he hadn't asserted himself, although he was far better read than all his fellow-students. He was scared when he started his career as a schoolmaster. He had lodgings with judge Velceanu's family. His room was overcrowded with furniture, daguerrotypes and all sorts of useless things. In the beginning he had not noticed Mrs. Mimi's advances... he didn't even dare look at her, so disturbed was he by her voluptuous ripeness. At forty-one, Mrs. Velceanu looked very much like the statue of Venus of Milo. To Suslănescu, accustomed to the extravagant beauty of the women of Bucharest, Mrs. Velceanu's figure suggested a yet unfulfilled motherhood. He fell in love with her and was afraid that Mr. Velceanu, a very tall and lean man, bald-headed and sallow-complexioned as if he were always upset, might notice the real nature of his confusion. That is why he instinctively began to play the grotesque part of a naïve child, helpless and muddle-headed, a thing that would do away with any misgivings. Mrs. Velceanu quite naturally entered in the game, and began to "pamper" him, as she put it. She suggested he should not have his meals in town any more, but board with them. That did not suit Suslănescu. He would have liked to be quite free to come and go, and to account to nobody, but he was unable to find any arguments for refusing her offer.

As he saw her very often now (in the morning after Velceanu left for the Tribunal, she dressed only in a black dressing-gown with a white collar *à la Catherine de Médicis*, brought him his breakfast), his love left the ethereal spheres and became an erotic obsession.

He would have liked to have some experienced adviser who might teach him how to act, but of course he did not dare talk to anybody about such things. A year ago Velceanu had been away in the country on an investigation, and Suslănescu on coming home found Mimi waiting for him with a bottle of wine. Outside it was raining, a monotonous autumn rain, and she had made a fire in the stove of her bedroom. Things happened very simply, so simply that Suslănescu was very disappointed. He would have desired an ascending love, with a finale prepared by a prolonged pause in the sphere of poetry, and resembling a dramatic soulful surrender. Mimi-Marie — as he called her — was at the same time passionate, motherly, shrilly childish, and experienced; in moments of relaxation he felt her so far away from him as if she belonged to another world, so that, overwhelmed with shame at his nakedness, he dared not move or breathe, for fear of waking her up. He started fretting about all kinds of things: what would happen should Velceanu catch them; what would become of this woman when he deserted her, for that moment too was bound to come, what would he say to her at parting, how he himself would suffer at that, knowing he had behaved like a cad towards the woman who had given up everything for him — all those thoughts were unbearable. Marie was extraordinarily imprudent. Suslănescu thought it was a consequence of her unsuccessful marriage. She would come to him at night, cuddle up in his arms, while he listened attentively for every noise in the house, not daring to repel her. She misinterpreted his coldness, began to weep and reproach him that he did not love her. Harried by those scenes, he found a remedy: he did not answer a word, but wept too, silently, with abundant tears. Then Marie kissed his wet eyelids, his lips distorted by sobs, and to soothe him, whispered softly into his ear: "Sleep, sleep, mother's pet..."

After the expelling of Andrei, Suslănescu had wanted to commit suicide. He knew he could not do it in a moment of acute despair, with a kind of fury, but would have liked to convince himself that there was no other way out. As he hated thinking of this, feeling that in all his previous experience there existed no point of comparison, he tried to collect all the quotations in which famous poets praise suicide: "It is not of death that I shudder, but of its eternity." "To die, to sleep, to dream... there's the rub." "Do not pry into those laws, or you will lose your reason." He remembered all the famous suicides: Seneca, Petronius, Cleopatra; then he asked himself why Napoleon had not taken his life, he who had lost everything, and preferred to be exiled at St. Helena, like a hen in a coop. During those days, Marie confessed to him that she was pregnant, and Suslănescu became more and more desperate. She was composed and had told him this like any other daily occurrence, but he suffered for nights on end, ran away from home pretending he had some urgent business in the provinces. When he returned, he had made up his mind to confess the truth to Velceanu and to accept anything: to be slapped in the face by the latter, to be disgraced publicly... Velceanu had not returned yet, Marie in her black dressing-gown, which Suslănescu couldn't look at now without shuddering, was in her bedroom, reading a French novel with a yellow cover. She was pale.

"It's over," she said satisfied, when she saw him stopping in the doorway with bent head. "It only cost me three thousand five hundred."

"What?" stuttered Suslănescu.

"Why, you little silly: the operation. Come and kiss me. I've suffered so much for you."

Suslănescu thought he was going to faint. He gripped the door, splitting his nails. He understood her sacrifice: this woman, barren hitherto, had sacrificed her child, their child, for his tranquillity. He came staggering near the bed, fell on his knees and, burying his face in the scented silk of the bed-cover, he groaned:

"Marie, Marie... why did you do it, my beloved?"

"Little silly, little silly..." she said passing her fingers through his thick hair, "everything went off well... In

two days I'll be up and about... Sandy, my little Sandy..."

From that day on he realized that the freedom towards which he had been romantically aspiring to since his student days, was an empty word, that he had become, involuntarily, the prisoner of a fatality, and that he could do nothing about it. Marie assumed the rights of a wife. She had forbidden him to associate with Vîslan any more, and Suslănescu had to use a husband's ruses to meet him. He found the strength to confess all this to Vîslan who, without appearing to be touched or indignant, advised him to move out of that house, and come and live in his own fairly spacious dwelling in town.

"That would be impossible," Suslănescu sighed, although it meant the prospect of a care-free life.

"You're an ass."

"How could you understand!"

The meetings usually took place in the "Mircea" restaurant. Of late, Vîslan had become more and more gloomy, and kept prophesying cataclysms, as if it caused him a wicked pleasure. Suslănescu tried to oppose him, although it was useless, for Vîslan did not support his theories by arguments; he simply stated them, without right of appeal. One night, the manager of the "Tribuna Romînă" rang him up and told him that they must meet at his place on the following day, very early in the morning. Towards seven o'clock Suslănescu rang at the door of his flat. Vîslan answered the bell himself. He was wearing a green bathing-gown, and on his head a woollen cap with a red tassel, pulled down on his forehead. He looked as if he hadn't slept, and was not shaven. The room was full of pictures with which local talents rewarded a kindly criticism in the art columns of the paper: naked women, busts of gipsies in crayon, rural landscapes, carved porches, little wooden churches, and interiors of pubs.

"Sit down!" Vîslan ordered , showing him a chair on the arm of which a pair of trousers, a shirt the colour of unripe melon, and a pile of newspapers had been flung.

"What's up?" said Suslănescu rather scared.

"I haven't slept the whole night, old chap. Have you heard about the German commission come to dismantle the factory?

"No. And why does this trouble you?"

"Are you mad? The whole town is astir, and you lie sleeping in Mrs. Velceanu's arms!"

"Let's leave that out, please," said Suslănescu irked, shaking his head.

Vîslan was restless. He paced the room nervously, just as Robber used to do, which seemed to him the expression of intellectual torment. He also moved his lips and frowned.

"Why, Sandu, don't you understand? This matter has caused a tremendous uproar in all the circles of the town. In all of them! It is, so to say, a sort of, a sort of..."

"Affair of the necklace," Suslănescu stated.

"Yes, something like that."

Vîslan stopped, cocked his ear, then glided to the door with muffled steps, opened it and looked out. There was nobody there.

Suslănescu got scared. If Vîslan, whom he had known so indifferent, had become cautious, matters were indeed serious. He was sorry he had come.

"Now I need your help," Vîslan said. "It is a decisive moment on which an enormous lot of things depend. Perhaps... our salvation. Are you my friend?"

"I think your question is meaningless..." (He was thinking: 'But why did he ask it? What's come over him that he should ask that very question just now?')

"It isn't. Here's what I believe: if we let this favourable moment pass by, it means that we have let everything out of our hands, and later on we'll bitterly regret it. As far as I've sensed it, everybody is upset by this matter. Minds are aflame. What if we too were to pour some oil on it?"

"Why do you talk like that?" Suslănescu interrupted him sadly.

Vîslan was silent; he hid his forehead in his hands and admitted:

"I don't know what to do. Everything seems so dangerous to me, like dancing on a tight rope. I've heard the communists too have taken a stand. They've filled the town with leaflets. We're the only ones to be hard up for money, and keep publishing war bulletins which nobody takes

the trouble to read any more, because they're pointless; we rack our brains to write deplorable articles, as we did about that volunteer. This is what I suggest: let's write a leader: "Rumania's Fate in These Decisive Moments."

"And what is Rumania's fate?" said Suslănescu trying to smile. "I can no longer see what it is."

"There you are talking nonsense again. I'm surprised at you, such an educated man... Don't you understand? Everything is quite simple. History teaches us that this country has never been so to say independent..."

"I must protest!"

"Don't interrupt me... Well, to please you, let's leave aside the period of Stephen the Great or Michael the Brave. But for modern times you must agree with me. We are a country placed at crossroads, and we can't be free, absolutely free."

"Absolute freedom!" Suslănescu, who was thinking of something else, waved his hand.

But Vîslan had warmed up. It seemed to him he was on the point of discovering great truths:

"Turks, Germans, Austrians, Frenchmen, Englishmen, Americans, even Dutchmen, have poked their noses in here; they have quarrelled on our behalf and have solved our vital problems; our own problems, do you get me? In London, at Amsterdam. In Petersburg or Paris, as well as in Constantinople! No doubt, they needed either our wheat or our oil. Sometimes they got what they wanted by getting round us, at other times they robbed us without more ado."

"I don't know what you're driving at!"

"Why? It's quite plain. Listen: we are here at the crossroads between West and East; in the Balkans, where everything is topsyturvy. Sometimes we've even had prophets who trode on sand and cried in the desert. The people, it is true, followed them, and why not? Vain experiments: Bălcescu died at Naples..."

"At Palermo!"

"It's all the same. Avram Iancu went mad. The mystery, if I may call it a mystery, is that our 'destiny,' if the word doesn't seem too disheartening to you, is to be servants, my dear chap. Wait, wait, don't get excited, don't turn up

your nose, you scholar, you! The matter is, to my meaning, so to say, very clear: what kind of servants? Stable boys stinking of horse dung, or ushers with a gold-braided uniform, whom the master call 'Mr. John'? So we solve the problem by deciding what kind of masters we choose, what masters we are fighting for, my dear boy!"

"This theory — Suslănescu said in an acrid voice — is ghastly materialism, and I can't accept it. I prefer to blow my brains out, this very moment."

"What's the use of all those big words, Sandu? Have we a right to utter big words? Don't you see what we are called? My name is Ion, yours Sandu, someone else's Vasilică or Petre. Are those names of independent men?"

"You're a fool or you're tight!" said Suslănescu in a rage.

"No," said Vîslan becoming serious again. "Look at a map, look at the rows of figures in statistics, in a geography book for the fourth elementary form. We have everything we require to enable us to live by ourselves, yet we can not. Our Constitution is taken after the Belgians, the monetary reform after the Swiss, sports from the Swedes, and God only knows what other things we copy from someone else. And now we've gone and got into a fine scrape: our troops in Transnistria, the Ukraine, Crimea, Kuban, Terek, even near the Caucasus. And can you tell me what for? To me it is clear that, without a miracle, the Germans have lost the war. Even if not right now, but in 1948 English, American and Russian flags will certainly wave over Berlin. Now I'd like to know what flag you want to see fluttering at Bucharest!"

"The Rum..."

"Shut up! Let's talk sense. The Russians are near, that's a fact. Luckily Rumania is for England and the United States far too important a chapter, a point of support of too great a strategical value here at the gates of the East, for them to let us out of their hand. This hand, my dear chap, is gloved. I shouldn't mind at all to be called John Wysslane, to be sincere, even Ivan Vîslanov, but I'm afraid it will be impossible. Well then, we must get some visiting-cards printed on the sly, and produce them at the right moment. That's why I called you."

Suslănescu rose and stretched out his hands to him in a gesture of supplication.

"Why do you sully your soul, Ion, with such loathsome presumptions? Yes, forgive my brutality loathsome! The idea of nationality..."

"This idea failed at Stalingrad."

Suslănescu grinned with the most utter contempt.

"You've been talking to Robber again... Only a Jew could put such monstrous ideas into your head."

Vîslan went red, then began to gesticulate excitedly.

"Alright, alright, all this is for the future; some day you'll agree with me! The question is what do we do now? The Germans have come and want to take away our factories. What's your attitude going to be, Mr. Suslănescu? Don't you think, like your precious Napoleon at Waterloo, that here we'll have to fight a battle?"

"He said that at Austerlitz," answered Suslănescu, trying not to smile.

"Can you keep a secret?" asked Vîslan coming nearer.

"Don't you realize that such questions are insulting?"

"Yesterday I talked with Baron Papp of Zerind," Vîslan went on, without taking any notice of Suslănescu's remonstrance. "He advised me to take up a stand, very cautiously at first, but in a way to make everything clear, without, so to say, committing myself. Man — he took him by the lapel of his shabby grey coat — does your heart not bleed to see how the Huns are robbing our country's property? This factory — he tried to work himself up, but his enthusiasm fell suddenly to a normal temperature — this factory, blast it, may be our monument or our mausoleum!"

"Which is well put," nodded Suslănescu. "And in what style do you want to write your article?"

"In a scientific style."

"Then you ought to look for Robber."

"He refuses to do it. He seems to be mad. He asked me to stop coming to his place. Damn him! A word from me would be enough to send him to a concentration camp."

"What if *he* said a word?"

"You haven't slept well this night," said Vîslan losing patience. "What the devil! Do you really want to make me

angry? Better take a sheet of paper — you'll find one in the drawer of the desk over there — and start writing a beginning, for the rest I'll manage somehow. Damn this life! How long shall I have to run after a hundred hares? Let somebody come, once and for all, Hottentots islanders or Huguenots, to let me set up a little party of my own, you know, all of a piece, with a serious programme, and you'll see what villas we'll build ourselves in a year's time at Mamaia and at Sinaia. I'm keeping a place for you in our managing council."

"Thank you ever so much!" Suslănescu bowed sarcastically. But he knew Vîslan wasn't joking and he envied him this stupid, unpractical but sincere faith.

"Now shut up, if you want me to write," he snapped, and Vîslan, putting a finger to his lips, tiptoed to the cupboard where he kept his books, took out a bottle of wine and two glasses, filled them up, admired the golden colour of the wine and swallowed it down in a single gulp.

Suslănescu, bending over the spotless sheet, was not writing. He was asking himself what his country meant to him, and, although he wanted to find a dry formula, a sort of definition, he did not succeed. Fragments of ideas and of pictures crowded his mind. The 10th of May parade seen in his childhood, their mortgaged land, inscriptions in ancient churches, the excitement he felt in deciphering them, the state of enthusiasm caused by the victories of the Rumanians in the wars waged during their troubled history — all came back to him. Even now, at the age of twenty-six, it was enough for him to see troops passing by, the flag rent by shells fluttering like the glorious wing of an eagle, or to hear the harsh strains of a military march, to have his eyes brimming with tears. The cynicism of Vîslan's words had shocked him. 'The thirst for freedom,' he thought, 'is inborn, the same as instincts. Still, some are doomed to be slaves, like myself. Could this predestination be only individual? Has the whip of so many pitiless masters not created a common psychology, a gregarious one?' He looked with hatred at Vîslan who didn't dare move for fear of disturbing him. Enraged, he crumpled the paper up between his fingers, with convulsive gestures, and said thickly:

"I won't write! D'you hear me? I won't, I won't, I won't write!"

He rushed to the door, knocking his shoulder against it, pushed it open with his whole body and ran madly down the stairs, not looking where he trod.

Stupefied, Vîslan rushed after him, but, hearing the door bang noisily, he cursed him angrily:

"This man is mad too... damn him!"

Therefore there was nothing else for him to do but to entreat Robber to write the "cute" article. He went and lifted the receiver, holding it up carefully as if it were a serpent.

*

In the car racing along the wet asphalt General Belega was smoking cigarette after cigarette. The rain which had begun about eleven o'clock at night was trickling in small shreds down the car windows, and the military chauffeur wiped the wind-screen from time to time with an old woollen stocking.

"Faster!" the prefect ordered, and the chauffeur stepped automatically on the accelerator.

Belega was saying to himself: 'I behaved like a cad, like a coward, like a man devoid of dignity, like a common civilian.' He was tugging the whole time at the peak of his cap, as if wanting to pull it down over his eyes, so as not to see anything. 'What about my preposterous attitude, that of a soft-headed ass and milksop? What about the smiles with which I, the general and prefect, received that scoundrel?'

"Faster! Don't you hear?" he screamed, and the veins on his forehead strangled in the leather lining of the cap throbbed painfully. He was reminded of a stupid happening which had created a sensation at the time when he was a second lieutenant. A colleague of his had been to the theatre with a girl belonging to one of the best families, and her mother. The young officer, who had eaten rather too much, was tortured with stomach ache. Suddenly, in the silence of the house following intently the sufferings of the *prima donna*, there rang out, like a pistol shot, an improper noise. The officer sprang to his feet, got out of the box and in the lobby shot himself in the chest. The wound

was not mortal, the officer recovered. As he had been a man of honour, nobody ever reminded him of this grotesque affair, and he married the girl with whom he had been to the theatre. Honour! What funny views people held in those times! Now *he* ought to shoot himself ten times over. He had behaved like a fool, like a second lieutenant called all of a sudden, to command a division!

"Stop!" he ordered. "I'll walk for a bit to stretch my legs."

The sergeant stopped the car, got down, opened the back door and, while Belega was getting out, he put a leather coat carefully on his shoulders.

"I'll call you, stay here. You may smoke."

They were out of the town, and, under the rain that slanted down, swept by the wind, the trees, the fragments of sky free from the grip of the clouds, looked like a scenery.

The general took his cap off, and the rain coming down in torrents refreshed his high forehead.

'Have I fallen so low,' he asked himself rather puzzled 'that the mere presence of a German uniform should frighten me, a general? After all, what arguments had Fritsch brought up? None at all. The possibility of an elastic shortening of the front-line, bringing therefore the Russian air-force positions much nearer, the need to keep the Transylvanian triangle supplied, as it was the future centre of resistance? How ghastly! In the other war too there had been a death triangle. Mărăşeşti, Mărăşti, Oituz... "No passage he re!" had been the slogan. But against the Germans!... And I, what did I do? I didn't say a word. I kept my mouth shut. I neither asked whether they had the Marshal's authorization nor questioned the legality of this action... I just acquiesced... Appalling!'

He said to himself that he had thus risked not only his position or his rank, but even his head, in the event — as Romulus Papp had told him — of the Marshal being called upon to take the leadership, should there be a change of direction. It was obvious that Antonescu would disown him then, even if the decision to dismantle the works really existed. But did this order exist? He had not asked von Mertsch, or had not dared to. Yes, yes, that was it:

he hadn't dared. He had only nodded to show that he agreed, that he understood, of course, everything was so clear. Yes, exactly... a strategic triangle leaning to the South and East of the Carpathians, an impregnable bastion which would be bombed daily until it would be turned into a heap of corpses and ruins like the Atlantic Wall; meanwhile Antonescu and all those who had remained in Bucharest, would declare those who "defended" the triangle, traitors, and sentence them to death by default.

He wrapped his leather coat round his massive shoulders. He was a soldier by profession, not a cabinet politician; he couldn't understand those subtle discriminations, and they were not subtle in fact, but a mouse-trap in which there was not even the prospect of a bit of bacon as bait. And the unbearable sarcasm of that vile German (vile was the right word) when on taking leave they had shaken hands: "I am glad to have found in you, sir, a soldier, a real man, now when all are trying to save their skins. Therefore I rely upon you to give us all the assistance required in checking any disorder that might arise and be disagreeable to all of us." "Evidently," he had replied, bending his head like someone who could take those hints. "And any kind of disturbance, any kind— von Mertsch had smacked his lips as if cracking a whip — must be stopped pitilessly, no matter who may be the cause!"

"Evidently, of course," the prefect had answered manfully.

But if "they" knew that...

He turned on his heels. His spurs would rust in this rain. The car was not to be seen on the deserted road.

"Hey, driver!" he cried. "Driver!"

He could hardly wait to be back at home, to listen to the quarrelsome prattling of the children, to drink a cup of hot tea with rum in it. He sneezed. "That would be the last straw, if I fell ill now," he told himself and started. Wouldn't this be a way out after all? Tortured by the feeling of a cowardly and selfish guiltiness, he opened with impatient fingers his celuloid collar, his tie, his coat, and let the rain pour down on his hot purple neck. "And if I do fall ill, will they leave me alone?" He buttoned his coat up, huddled up in the leather coat,

and made quietly for the place where the car was waiting for him. In the dark dampness he didn't see it and almost bumped into it.

"I've been calling for you for an hour, you idiot!" he shouted getting into the car slapping the chauffeur over his nape. This did not make him feel any calmer, as several well applied slaps on the face would have done.

'What if he overturned the car?' the general asked himself, obsessed. 'Why did I hit him?'

His balance restored the issue now seemed to him extremely simple. He would go to Bucharest and try to obtain an order signed by Antonescu himself or by "Ică," the Vice-president of the Council. There was nothing else to be done. But till then? And if Papp and his men started something, what would he do? Be indifferent? What if the Gestapo arrested him, and the baron started blabbing?

He didn't even notice that the car had stopped for some time in front of the house. He got out extricating his bulky body, fumbled in his pockets, found his purse and handed a hundred-lei note to the sergeant.

"Here you are, Sergeant."

Then he ascended the entrance steps, jumping two at a time. Inside a light was burning.

*

Iosif Cloambeş had got a complete outfit: a tunic, trousers, shirt, drawers, boots, puttees, a belt, a knapsack, a cap, canteen, a ZB gun N° U.28,940, a bayonet and a little round tin plate marked 9,281. The regiment dormitories were full of men. There were two in each bed, and it was said that next day they would begin to drill. Ioşca cried for hours on end, until his bed-fellow, a man from Lugoj, as thin as a stick and extremely nasty, growled at him:

"Be quiet, you cry-baby. Let me sleep. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

And he fell asleep on the spot, a heavy sleep, tossing about and kicking his heels so that he nearly threw Ioşca out of the bed. The smell of hundreds of unwashed feet and bodies made him sick, and he felt like vomiting. He heard outside in the yard the yells of the non-commis-

sioned officers and the creaking of the wagons and of the regimental guns, which were being brought out of the sheds. Gently, so as not to wake up his ill-tempered bed-fellow, Ioşca rose on one elbow. Of the long dormitory with two rows of beds one above the other only a narrow space between the beds could be seen, lit by a dull reddish lamp. You could hear snoring, or words muttered in sleep: Ri-ight, forward, march!" "Marie, oh Marie! Hehe! that's right, girl!" He couldn't stand it any longer. He got up and pulled on his stiff boots in the dark. 'Who knows who wore them before,' he said disgusted. He had heard that at the front the boots were taken off the dead and sent back to Rumania. He went out into the long passage where it smelt of dirt and urine. The sentry looked at him in surprise.

"What, aren't you sleeping?"

"I'm not sleepy," and he went towards the end of the passage.

The whole time since they had taken him from that officers room he had been thinking. Now he understood, and a blind fury was maddening him. It was only that beggar, that ne'er-do-well of Mitru Moţ, who had done this to him to avenge himself. If he ever meets Mitru again, he'll knife him like a pig.

"What's the matter with you there?" said a harsh, deep voice.

The sergeant-major — the one who had dealt them out the equipment and curses that same afternoon — was standing before him, in his drawers and slippers, holding with both hands his rounded belly. Without his uniform, with bent hairy legs and crooked toes, he was not so terrifying as in the morning; that was why Ioşca heaved a sigh from the bottom of his heart, right in front of him.

"Oh, sir, they're sending us off!"

"It can't be helped, man. That's how war is."

He looked at Ioşca. He seemed to him nicer than the louts he had had to deal with for years.

"Where d'you come from?"

"From Lunca, please, sir," answered Ioşca servilely. The fact that the sergeant-major was talking to him, gave him some hope. If he had to be sent there, let it not be

quite in the first line. Everybody says that the war would not last long now. Perhaps by the time he got there, it would be over.

"And how is it that you've been taken only now, what ?"

"I don't know myself, please, sir." Ioşca's face darkened. "Because I was one of those who aren't enlisted."

"Hear, hear, how's this ?" the sergeant-major marvelled. "Let's hear about it."

"Well, you see, sir, it's like this... I had a plot of tobacco, and those who have tobacco sown don't get taken to the war."

"Is that so?" The sergeant-major became curious. "How is it then that they *did* take you ?"

Interspersing his story with a lot of "if you please, sir," Ioşca told his whole tale as he knew it and as he suspected it. He didn't forget to mention the nice little sum his dad had given him to alleviate his sufferings.

"Well, what are we doing standing right here in the passage ?" the sergeant-major wondered. "Come on with me into the storehouse there, where I've got my bed; what you've told me is most interesting. I think you must have made enemies for yourself, somehow. Aren't you on bad terms with anybody ?"

"Oh, but of course, sir, if you please," Ioşca said while entering the big white-washed store-room, where all kinds of outfits were lying on shelves or hanging on hooks.

"That's how I see it: it's the enemy you have who did this to you," said the sergeant-major, bending over to him. "Did you say you came from Lunca ? I think we passed through it during some manoeuvres we had in 1938, or was it '39 ?"

"Did you ?" Ioşca brightened up. Hope was growing in him. He had thought more than once to have a talk with a non-commissioned officer. These are old bitches, as one says in the army. You never know how they may come in useful.

"Now, if you say you sowed tobacco, matters change. Fact is: what's the matter with that paper of yours ?"

"That Bolshie I've been telling you about wrote it in my name," Ioşca answered. "He's the one who could have done it."

"Hm... and you mean that... Well, if that's how things stand, we may change them," the sergeant-major laughed, showing his yellow gums where two teeth were missing right in front. "But you know... you see... there's a way of..."

"Dear me, sir, I've got some about me and, if you wish, if you allow me to..."

"I allow you," the sergeant said grandly. "You may leave it to me to..."

Ioșca ran quickly into the dormitory, unlocked his chest and produced two thousand lei. He came breathlessly, under the sentry's astonished eyes, and laid them on the little table, in front of the sergeant-major.

"Yes, yes," the latter said gravely. (He had not expected so much. It meant that the wretch was well-off.) "Listen, I can't promise you much... Well, you see, this isn't peace time. It's martial law in times like these."

Ioșca stared petrified. Could it be that, now that he had taken his money, he would pretend he couldn't do anything?

The sergeant-major seemed to guess his fear and laughed.

"Don't be an ass, man. Look here, I am at the *commissariat*, you get it? I've never heard a shot, except sometimes at manoeuvres. Do you think one doesn't need a pate for a thing like that? How many friends of mine have been sent to the front, through the *commissariat* of course, and have died! D'you think it's only in the first line you can die? At the Don bend they were caught so easily from behind, by the tanks. I've spoken to some of the few chaps who escaped. They were downright mad, and their behinds shook at the bare thought of what they had been through. If you're a sensible chap, you can stay here at the office, as assistant quarter-master... This much I can do for you, it is not a difficult thing, only you've got to be a man. Now, go to bed! Tomorrow you'll come and sleep here with me, in the store-room. First of all I've got to talk to the major, but don't you worry about that, we're as thick as thieves, d'you understand? What with one thing and another... We're human, aren't we? From tomorrow onwards, you come here, or perhaps, maybe, who knows..."

Ioşca came up to him and, taking his red hand washed to the bones with army soap, kissed it.

"Get yourself going! You b... fool, what do you think you're doing?" The sergeant was moved. "One can see you're not a scamp! Get out!"

Next morning, befor reveille, the sergeant-major came into the dormitory and, without taking any notice of the expostulations of those he was waking up, he called out:

"You there, Iosif Cloambeş, where are you? Sleeping like a log, are you? Get up quick! Your old man's here."

Ioşca dressed rapidly, trying to catch a look of understanding from the sergeant-major's eyes. The latter, with legs wide apart and his hands on his hips, was hurrying him, blinking angrily.

They went out together, passing through the big courtyard of the barracks, where horses, long green waggons, guns newly-painted in white, black and brown zigzags, balls of pressed hay, and big lorries painted green too, were packed together.

"Mind how you speak to your father, so that we can get on well afterwards."

Lădoi Cloambeş began to whimper when he saw his son in the loose ill-fitting, hairy khaki uniform. The sergeant-major discreetly stood a step back, not to disturb them.

"They've cut your hair very short," Lădoi brought forth.

"Oh, if he had come to me straight away, he might have kept his hair. What the devil, we're human and understand..." Here he again tapped his cheek meaningly and added: "We know how to behave..."

Ioşca wanted to ask news from home, what his mother was doing, but could find no words. Now, on seeing his father, a lump kept coming up and down his throat.

They stood silent and looked at one another. Then, when the trumpet sounded the reveille, Lădoi hugged his son, slipped some money into his hand and whispered:

"Whom had I better talk to here?"

"Don't you bother, everything is going to be all right," put in the sergeant-major who had a very sharp ear. "Don't you worry, Uncle. Leave it to Borţan. That's my name," he said coming towards Lădoi, holding out his hand.

"I quite forgot to introduce myself." He winked so that Ioşca shouldn't see him: "Don't worry, I assure you... Where Borţan lends a hand God does the same. Only, you know..."

"May God keep you in good health; as for the rest, we'll see to that," said Cloambeş bowing obsequiously.

On the same day after lunch, just as they were preparing to go and drill on the bank of the Mureş, and the officers were shouting like mad: "File up there, won't you! Is that how you want to get to the front? It's just as if you had never done any drilling..." Borţan came along, went up to a lieutenant and reported something to him.

"Cloambeş of the IIIrd Company!" the officer shouted.

"Here, sir!" Ioşca felt that the miracle had happened.

"Report to Major Angheliu. The others, listen to my order: direction, the bank of the Mureş. Start singing! Forward... march!"

The hoarse voices, not used to sing in a chorus, burst out:

Last night the war began
It started at the Pruth...

Borţan was walking briskly alongside Ioşca.

"I talked about you, told him lots of things. The major is as good as hot cakes." The sergeant pursed his lips: "And he gambles, plays cards! Something terrible. He plays and loses... You get me?"

"Of course!" Ioşca smiled broadly.

"But delicately, like this... You go near the table, shout as loud as you can: 'If you please, sir, I'm private so and so, I report so and so.' He will say: 'Stand at ease!' You stand near the table, say your say and put into his sight.... you understand? into his sight... Everything is arranged. The surgeon will write out a note saying you suffer from consumption and syphilis, and that you're not quite right in the head."

When they passed by the gate, the sergeant-major said to the sentry:

"We're going to the Recruiting Office! Orders from headquarters!"

After walking for some time in the hot streets, they entered a beerhouse and drank two pints of beer each.

"Listen, chap," Borţan said wiping away the yellow bitter froth from his lips, "give me, you know, delicately, the money under the table. It doesn't do for you to pay, I being the higher rank. You may add the other... my share. That's right, that's right. Let's go."

In the courtyard of the Military Club the sergeant-major coached him once more.

"If you're asked too many questions, don't you let out too much. The money... let's say five thousand, put it down conspicuously, but delicately, and don't look in that direction any more, that the major shouldn't feel ill at ease when he takes it."

"Thank God, sir, that I met you. What should I have done without you?" Ioşca exclaimed in an outburst of joy.

"If it hadn't been me, it would have been someone else," the sergeant-major answered, his thoughts a long way off. "How much did you give me?" he asked, not succeeding to count the money in his pocket without taking it out.

"Two thousand more, sir," Ioşca spoke through his nose, uneasily.

"Add one more, don't be stingy. That's right, that's right. Come here and stand near me. It's all right, scoot. Wait for me here in the yard, for I've some business here. Get me?"

The following day, after handing in his outfit, Ioşca had a booze with Borţan in the pub near the station, and the same evening he was back home. His mother threw herself on her knees in front of the icons. Lădoi alone paced the room gloomily, his hands at his back.

"What a lot of money!" he muttered, asking himself angrily if he couldn't have got away with less.

Ioşca laughed and hugged him, as he knew how to do when he wanted to endear himself to somebody. This time he was sincere and happiness was seething in him:

"Leave be... dad... leave be. Lucky I'm home. Thanks to Heaven and to Uncle Borţan."

"Now stop simpering," Lădoi lectured him, flattered all the same. "I'll see what reward I can expect from you later on."

The same day, Major Angheliu rang up Vîslan, and told him with comical demureness:

"Major Angheliu speaking... About that volunteer of yours. He went to his duty, the hero of the district!"

"To hell with him, and you after him!" Vîslan bawled as loud as his pasty tongue would let him. He could hardly utter the words, as he had been drinking heavily for two days running.

CHAPTER X

Every afternoon Lucian went to see Father Potra. The latter had given him a key, so that he did not need to ring when he came. They spent whole hours together until late in the evening, in an oppressive atmosphere of heated, almost venomous argument. When Father Potra answered the boy's torturing questions by insipid sermons — even his gentle, pleasant tone became as boring as monotonous rain — Lucian felt like screaming:

'Tell me something else! You must surely know why you believe in God!'

He had changed greatly during those last few days; he was restless, uneasy. He tried not to think of Sonia any more; on the way to Father Potra's he was dreadfully frightened of meeting her: one single look only would certainly have made her understand everything.

Potra misunderstood Lucian's passionate way of arguing. At first he had been pleased, mistaking the latter's distress for the anguish of a soul drawing nearer to faith; but he soon became frightened, as he failed to find arguments to prove the truth of what he said. Lucian had re-read the Bible and had told him, deeply disappointed, that, apart from the Old Testament which might pass for an interesting novel, the rest was but an anthology of poems, a collection of platitudes, of childish raptures and obscurities, fit to be applied at any time and place, like a shapeless coat.

"For two thousand years these 'platitudes' have guided the civilized world. All that is best in mankind has developed in the Christian world. Is that not enough food for reflection, even for you?"

Lucian said nothing and sat with bowed head. He could have spoken to him about ancient civilizations, about Eastern wisdom, but what would have been the good of it? Father Potra would have set forth another argument: "All things have a cause. Why won't you carry the principle of causality to its very end?" He did not realize how suspicious the look that came from under the lenses of his spectacles had become. Father Potra was terrified; he felt he was losing him and then started it all anew.

"Listen to me, Lucian dear... You're a learned young man..."

"I am not! Stop that eternal refrain! I know nothing."

"Your courage in admitting it is a credit to you, dear boy. Socrates had the same courage."

"Yes, I know..."

He realized he was tormenting Father Potra, but he was tormenting himself as well, and would not spare himself...

"Well then — the priest went on wearily — you've been to the seaside, haven't you? What would you say about a child who would stick its finger in the sand and want to collect the whole billowy sea in that small hole?"

"For God's sake!" said Lucian stopping his ears. "I've heard this allegory too often. Such arguments are a disgrace."

"Oh," sighed the priest, "what harm that fellow Andrei has done you! I feel I am to blame for not having protected you against that 'impure' friendship. But you

are nothing but a humble petty creature of animated clay... *Pulvis es et in pulvem reverteris* * ... You carry a divine spark. Why do you rebel against Him who gave it to you ?"

Lucian was silent, his forehead buried in his hands.

"Lucian! Look at me!" Father Potra ordered in a quivering voice. Lucian obeyed wearily. "No, not like that, but with the pure look you had six days ago. Why won't you be lulled by the peace that filled your soul then ? Why not ?"

"Because I... I am thinking," sighed Lucian.

"A great thinker once said: *Credo quia absurdum.* ** He too doubted, suffered, sinned, but wrote that wonderful work of our holy mother, the Roman Church: *De Civitate Dei...*"

Lucian changed the subject and begged him to speak to him about Italy. Father Potra, however, had no understanding for art. He thought the fact that the geniuses of the Renaissance had drawn their subjects from the Bible was significant, and again advised Lucian to meditate on this fact. He proved with the help of statistics published by a Catholic review printed in Blaj that in France no one read any more the works of Anatole France, that corrupter of souls; he read him the catalogue of scientists who had faith, and the hint that only a narrow-minded person could be an atheist was so clumsily disguised that Lucian could hardly refrain from answering rudely.

The next day he brought the priest his copy-book of verses. He had mentioned it to no one. Andrei alone knew that Lucian wrote poems, but he had not read any of them even to him. Once he had sent the literary society a poem signed with a pen-name. No one had understood a word of it, and Traian Mărieș had criticized it violently:

"The Rumanian peasant's labour in the fields is not mentioned in this poem; it is nothing but decadence. I must ask the author to forgive my stinging him..."

"You mean you're jabbing him!" Andrei had called out.

Though Lucian was aware that Potra would understand nothing, he nevertheless was waiting for his opinion anxiously.

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* You are dust, and back to dust you will go

** I believe because it is absurd

"You also write verses ?" the priest said in astonishment. "Splendid, my boy!"

He took the copy-book, opened it and started reading aloud:

Pastel of a Town
The hours have passed in dreary flight;
How empty seems to me this night
When vanquished flesh will rebel all the same,
And yell, a drunken beggar without shame!
This page, it lies before me, empty, white,
Alas! my thoughts are leaden, oh, how trite!
How easy 'tis to write without a scope
(Of truth, there's not even the slightest hope!)
My eyes are fountains full of tears,
The hours are lengthy, full of fears,
Because should you know that to you I lie,
You'd twitter like a sparrow, nay, you'd cry.
These trees are not of silver pure and bright;
In me, a damaged ship seems to abide,
Its anchor sunk deep in the pebbly bank;
She doens't move, oh, let her rest!
Maybe she'll soon sail full of skittish swank,
Deep in my breast...

Father Potra coughed and went on turning over the pages:

Sometimes these dreary years do seem to me
Like flies drowned in a cup of holy water.
My eyes fixed on the calendar do see
That hopes, alas! ever become remoter...

"Hem!"

With chains around his arms, his feet,
The poet every day grows fatter;
For him there is only one treat;
To evoke a bloody battle's clatter!

Heclosed the book.

"Trash! Sorry, but I expected more of you..." Not taking any notice of the glow that had suffused Lucian's

face, he looked into a drawer and produced an envelope. "Suciu sent me a poem... How gifted the lad is! If he goes on like that, he'll become a national poet."

Dear little village on a mountain high,
Not far from where the Bihor highlands lie,
You, nest of fine young lads with raven hair
And of a galaxy of maiden fair,
You, with your huts all bathed in golden light,
Are waiting to be freed this very night!
The shameful belt of steel is sure to break;
Your tearful peasants with a smile will wake
When we Rumanian soldiers in our stride
Rush up to free you with swords shining bright!

Lucian rose to his feet slowly:

"It's lovely, indeed," he said. "Good-bye, Father, I'll come again tomorrow."

When he got home, his mother told him with a worried look that Andrei had been looking for him.

"I told him you weren't in, that you'd left. He wants you to call on him. He said he would not be staying long in town. He's come for a few days to fetch his mother. Lucian dear, I think you..."

"Don't worry... I won't see him..."

He was thinking: 'What would be the good of it? Start splitting hairs over the same old things. He certainly is in a hurry, he's got to meet Sonia...'

"If he asks for me, tell him I'm not in," he said, looking aside.

"I can't tell you how glad I am, Lucian..." Suddenly his mother's face puckered up with fear. "I don't know what's happened to father. He came home quite beside himself... We're leaving for Moneasa. I've been packing the whole day long... I'm dead tired."

"Oh, we're leaving? Fine!" answered Lucian, absent-mindedly. He would so much have liked to see Andrei.

*

That day something had happened, which Varga thought was going to have incalculable consequences. He had gone to see Horoviță, the director of the "Indagrara" flour-

mill, a fellow who suffered from liver-complaint and went about dressed like a Baptist preacher. After expressing his joy at finally seeing him, the latter had acquainted him with the details of one of the factory's law-suits: a fraud committed by one of its contractors. Varga cautiously tried to discover the causes for which he had been transferred, and Horoviță answered calmly, as though it were a perfectly natural thing:

"What, hasn't Dărnescu told you ? Why, my dear fellow, your pro-British feelings are notorious. What the deuce! Everybody knows that our breaking-off with our former allies was a real tragedy for you!"

"For me ?" stammered Varga abashed.

"Come now, don't pretend," said Horoviță with a grin showing all his yellowish teeth. "That's why Dărnescu thought it wiser — for your own sake in the first place — that you should not be present in... those rather... delicate... circumstances."

"I see..."

"You surely know what a mixed-up affair the management of the factory is! The state, if I am not mistaken, is the main proprietor! So it is a state affair concerning the government and the Germans. As far as I know, Dărnescu has been promised, in return for his approval and provided he gives up his share in the company, a compensation in French francs and a passport for Switzerland, even a conveyance by air, if I am not mistaken. The fact is, he has done a splendid piece of business. What else can one expect ? The factory might be destroyed any day... Then... — and here Mr. Horoviță lowered his voice — it seems that a number of the shares, which the state bought through the National Bank, belonged to the Germans; as a matter of fact, they got them through one of the German Minister's men. What can one expect ? Just like Chicago!... As for you... take it from me, it's better so. Here, with us, there is peace and quiet, bread, flour, *mămăligă* *. We only supply the local garrison, and General Grințeș is very sensible."

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* A sort of maize-mush or corn-cake — the staple food of the Rumanian peasant

"Why, but I am as pleased as can be," smiled Varga. And indeed he was.

That day he studied the brief: a very fishy piece of business — so Varga thought — and Horoviţă was in it up to the neck. How had he persuaded the contractor to make such a confession? He surely must have thought he'd get off scot-free in the general confusion; he must also have told the contractor that, no matter what the sentence might be, it was most unlikely it would ever be enforced on him. Just by paying an adequate sum, and with Velceanu the prosecutor's complicity — the way the investigation had been made proved it — the matter would be settled. 'Well,' thought Varga tapping the desk with his hand, 'we'll see if you'll find things as easy as you think, Mister Horoviţă, I'll have a word to say too!'

He did not know exactly what he would do, but in any case he wanted to show Horoviţă he was not a mere dummy. He had handled even more difficult persons before.

The telephone bell disturbed his planning. He wearily thought that they were probably looking for someone else' and this annoyed him so much that he took his time to lift the receiver.

"Mr. Varga?" said an unknown voice.

"Yes, it's me." (How does he know I am here?)

"Benea speaking, Benea, the chief of the police. Don't you recognize my voice?"

Varga's hand began to shake. He coughed, clearing his throat.

"Of course, of course I do... What can I do for you, Mr. Benea?"

"Here's what I want, my dear Mr. Varga — was the 'my dear' meant to be a threat? — I must talk to you immediately. Immediately, do you get me?"

"All right, but I don't understand why I have the privilege of..." stammered Varga.

"We can't discuss the matter over the phone! Believe me, it is most important for you to come to the Police Headquarters at once!"

Bang! sounded the receiver at the other end of the line.

Varga sprang up from his seat and entered Horoviţă's office without knocking at the door. The latter was busy

sampling various kinds of flour, and his fingers and face were as white as a clown's.

"What's the matter?"

"Please... may I have the car, please?" groaned Varga utterly done up.

"For God's sake! Has anything happened?" asked Horoviță tapping the table superstitiously and sending up a small cloud of flour.

"I don't know yet..."

"You can have it... It's outside... The chauffeur'll drive you."

All the way, which was not too long, Varga kept shouting:

"Faster, man, faster! For God's sake, don't you understand? Hurry up, hurry up!"

'But why has he given me the chauffeur?' Varga wondered, starting terrified. 'Doesn't the whole town know I drive splendidly? Does he expect me not to return? And why did they call me this very day? Horoviță was the only one to know I'd come!'

"Wait for me here, please!" he called out irritably to the chauffeur. "Go and have a glass of beer in the meantime. But only one. I'll be back in two secs."

A policeman showed him the way along dismal passages to the office of Benea, the chief of the police, with whom Varga had been on terms of polite indifference. Benea had taken a doctor's degree in criminology at the Berlin University. He was a detective, and that is why Varga had not tried to be on friendly terms with him. He disliked Benea's shiny, shaven and perfectly round head and that very short upper lip on account of which he could never laugh, but only neigh.

He was shown in immediately. Benea was wearing a black uniform with thick white lace. He had shaved in the morning, and thin red gashes lined his chin. When he saw him (Varga must have looked like a ghost), he rose briskly and came to meet him, offering him a seat and a glass of water.

"Thanks, don't trouble," Varga said attempting to laugh, but his features were too stiff for it. He felt as though they were of glass and would break to pieces at the slightest

twitch and that he would start howling any moment. He had an unnatural and unaccountable fear of the Police and Secret Police, especially latterly, with the concentration camps, jails, the Gestapo... Better not think of such things. He gingerly sipped the stale, insipid water and made a wry face.

"The pipes are out of order, covered with rust, but I've got used to the taste," said Benea lightly, looking the other way.

When he heard the bottom of the tumbler knock against the thick glass-plate covering his desk, he turned round with his chair, opened a file in front of him, read something in it, frowned, passed his big, white, bony and very powerful hand over his bare skull and, looking at Varga from under bristly eyebrows, asked suddenly:

"Mr. Varga, have you any connections with the communists?"

"Good heavens!" said Varga perspiring profusely.

"Must I take this as an answer?" giggled Benea.

"Connnections, Mr. Benea? With the communists?" (He felt frightened.) 'If Andrei, that scoundrel... Hadn't the prefect warned him that the police were after the boy? Had he been arrested and had he blabbed that Lucian had advised him to leave?' He tried to pull himself together. He cast a circular look at the walls concealed by tall yellowish cupboards, with their doors wide open, showing a lot of black files of all sizes, then at the portraits of the King and the Marshal as though in a fit of childishness he would have taken them as witnesses.

"I have no connections with the communists! Of no kind!" he screamed shrilly, to make an impression on Benea. He succeeded to a certain degree, for the latter turned over the pages of the file. 'My file?' thought Varga shuddering.

"You see, Mr. Varga," said the police officer choosing his words, "we are Rumanians, and... we... you see what I mean, don't you?"

"I don't, Mr. Benea, no, I don't," answered Varga. His mouth had gone quite dry, but he could not risk asking for another glass of water; it would have looked suspicious. "Kindly tell me precisely the object of this interview. Is it an official inquiry? If so, I shall be obliged to request you to..."

"No! It's not official," said Benea. "It is... friendly, if I may use the word."

"Of course you may! It's a privilege for me..." said Varga bowing.

"The point in question is... the activity of the communists in this district. Please do not take offence at my words and pay great attention to what I'm going to say, and answer me with absolute sincerity. Much depends on what you are going to say."

He offered Varga cigarettes:

"Won't you have a cigarette?"

"Thank you, I will."

Benea puffed out the smoke two or three times through his nose.

"You, Mr. Varga, have always been an influential personality in this district and (he again smiled with his lower lip only), God grant things turn out as we all wish them to, I mean may you continue to represent us honourably..."

"Oh!" said Varga regaining his composure. Now he seemed to understand.

"That's why I shall talk very frankly. Here, in our city, which is a first-class manufacturing, strategical and economic centre, a very powerful Bolshevik organization is carrying on its activity. The truth is — and, please, let this truth be a secret between you and me (and he pointed at Varga with the lighted end of his cigarette) — we haven't managed to hunt it out. We've arrested some of our old customers, but... in spite of all our unsparing efforts, we haven't been able to learn anything at all."

"And what has this got to do with me?" 'What is he driving at?' Varga said to himself.

Benea was still unwilling to attack him openly. He closed and opened the file, patted his steel ink-pot and finally made up his mind.

"This is how things stand," he said. "We are perfectly well aware that attempts are being made just now to achieve a coalition of the opposition."

('The sittings at Papp's!' thought Varga shuddering. But now he controlled himself perfectly well.)

"That much we are sure of. For myself I know a lot of things, but... we're Rumanians. we mustn't let the com-

munists lead us by the nose. I know them, sir, and let me tell you: God preserve us... Now, one of their leaflets has appeared. A union of all democratic forces and so forth and so on..."

"I do not need communist leaflets to form an opinion of the internal and external situation!" said Varga frigidly. "A certain amount of experience and maturity..."

"The point in question is quite different. It's the 'commission.' You... you've discussed this matter... somewhere... I think?"

"Where? With whom? I don't understand," said Varga prevaricating, to gain time.

"Ah! that is no concern of mine, unless... Unless... if closing my eyes would mean risking my life."

Varga could not help laughing. He always took people's frankness for a sign of weakness.

"Yes, well may you laugh!" shouted Benea. "Ah! You carry on actively, you come together, hold conferences: 'should we get to work?' 'should we not?' 'should we wait for instructions from headquarters,' or 'send someone to Bucharest?' 'start a current of opinion?' he quoted and grinned showing his teeth to Varga whose legs began to shake. "But what about me? What am I to do, say?" shouted Benea, and his forehead turned red. "Easy, quite easy! And then the newspapers and the electioneering propaganda will start roaring about the informers, the torturers of the Secret Police." He banged the table with his fist, making the ink-pot leap like a huge black frog. "How many joint sittings have you had with the Bolsheviks?"

"None," whispered Varga. "None. I give you my word... My word as a Rumanian, lawyer and Christian. I swear to it solemnly!"

"All right, all right," Benea said, motioning him to calm down. "You know what... *Geheime Staatspolizei* means in Rumanian, don't you?"

"Of course I do... Secret pol..."

"I hope everything is clear now. Just one more question: with whom did you speak about the commission?"

"Well... you see... *entre nous*," exclaimed Varga rather ill at ease.

"Tell me exactly!"

"Mr. Benea," said the lawyer struggling to collect the last remnants of his tattered dignity.

"Well, then I shall tell you: with Măcean, the factory porter who was in fact the first to give you information, with Mr. Papp and Motzeanu, Guiașiu, Spinanțiu, Lucaci, Burtea, Father Potra, General Mîndru..."

'We're lost,' thought Varga shaken. He was dripping with perspiration and his left eyelid twitched spasmodically.

"That's all," said Benea rising. "I've done my duty... in spite of all risks I run by taking up this attitude."

"Mr. Benea," said Varga coming near him after having had great difficulty in getting up from the seat of the chair which was wet with perspiration... "We shall..."

"Hush! not a word. Once again: should anything happen — he leant towards him advisingly, half threateningly — and most likely something will happen, then..." He made the gesture of washing his hands. "I hope you may never come to know them! I shall see you out."

They took a few steps together towards the door.

"Mr. Varga — and Benea laid his heavy hand on his shoulder — if I were kept informed of all that is going on, it would be far easier for me to ... ward off what has to be warded off, and to... destroy what should be destroyed, if we think a bit of the morrow. The happiness of our country is our only aim, isn't it? And I... I think you see what I mean, don't you? I cannot say any more."

Varga leant against the door. His face had aged strangely and seemed covered with a thin layer of ashes.

"May I... may I have a glass of water," he whispered.

"Of course. With pleasure..." He heard the hissing sound made by the water running from the tap. 'This is probably where he washes his hands after lashing people.' He drank greedily the glass of water handed him by Benea who kept staring at him fixedly.

"I'll... I'll see," whispered Varga so low that he himself wondered if he had spoken or had only had the intention of doing it.

"Good bye, sir, and I hope..."

Back in the car, Varga felt as though he was going crazy. His head was like a burning-hot globe hanging on his

shoulders. Needles were pricking his knees, his hands and the tips of his fingers.

He stopped the car at the first call-box and rang up Papp. The servant told him in a worried voice that a great misfortune had happened: in the night the baron had had a fit of tonsillitis, had almost been suffocated and had been taken to a hospital and operated on immediately. No, visits were not allowed.

Varga did not go on to the mill: he drove home directly and, entering the hall like a whirlwind, bawled with his last strength:

"Sofica! Sofica! Where are you, dear? Come quickly! Let's pack! We're leaving for Moneasa tomorrow. It's very serious! The whole thing is going to the dogs!"

All day long they packed: linen, clothes, quilts, pillows, silver plate, valuable books, papers, his more important files. Teddie, though furious that they were leaving, had to help too. The big cases with iron bars and three or four padlocks were filled one after the other and there were still other things to be saved. They packed all day and by evening, dead tired and famishing, they could not tell if at noon they had had their meal or not.

*

The meeting was to be at five in the morning. The evening before Holtzmann had brought Jurca a very smart, almost new light-grey suit. It was a little tight under the arm-pits and about the shoulders, and Holtzmann laughed and advised Jurca not to make exaggerated movements. Jurca was sullen and restless. The small room, four metres by four, was too small for him: in two strides he reached the other side of it, walking heavily with bent head. He knew Holtzmann: he too was worried, although, pernickety as usual, he was arranging on the floor his shaving tackle, a cup of warm water and a towel. Then he produced a small mirror, breathed into it and polished it with his handkerchief.

"I managed to get some medicine too," he whispered to Jurca.

They were both silent, listening to Iulia's faint but hoarse breathing coming from the other room.

"We'll have to get her into a hospital, anyway!" said Jurca under his breath.

"Shave," said Holtzmann handing him a fresh blade. "Tell me, have you got everything clear?"

"No!" and Jurca laughed. "Of course I have."

"I only asked you because I simply had to say something," admitted Holtzmann darkly. "Don't forget, you only get into a cab coming from the opposite direction and stop past the house, as far as possible."

"I think it was I who told you about those rules for the first time," said Jurca in a low voice. "You're afraid, aren't you?"

"Yes, terribly. I cannot trust them. You oughtn't even to..."

"Don't talk rot," said Jurca turning to him, his face half covered with lather. "The instructions of the C.C. are very clear: any proposals made by the Social-Democrats or by the National-Peasant party — provided these proposals aim at defending the interests of the people — should be adopted and supported. You see, the matter about the German commission has driven them out of their senses. So far, they have talked of opposition, while supporting Antonescu all the time. Now it is clear they want to do something."

"Yes, yes, I know, but..."

"What's going on at the factory?" asked Jurca changing the subject.

"Nothing, for the moment. The commission is invisible. Măcean was visited by a man from the Secret Police."

"I know," assented Jurca. "What sort of fellow is he?"

"Trustworthy... Rather muddle-headed, but... Bota has promised me a new transport. In about three days we can begin practising. Tomorrow I'm meeting your father to check over our men again."

"Good."

Holtzmann came near him and examined his face.

"A little more under the chin. You're so prickly... In the parcel there's a new shirt for you, genuine artificial silk." And he added: "Are you sure of Murgescu?"

"Say forty-five per cent," said Jurca grimacing, "and it's saying a lot. Now, that'll do, my face's smarting."

He dressed quickly, then took a few steps in the small room.

"Quite a fop!" declared Holtzmann trying to joke. "Have you got cigarettes ? Is the money in your pocket ?"

Jurca stared at him, then began to laugh.

"Give me your watch. I can never be sure of mine."

Before leaving, Jurca stole up to the door of Iulia's room, opened it cautiously and put his head in.

"Is that you, Gheorghe ?" she asked. "Come in a second..."

She tried to sit up but couldn't. Jurca made an effort to look jolly.

"What d'you think of my appearance ? I'll be smarter than any bourgeois, don't you think so ?"

"Be careful. The baron's a dangerous fool... He's always had his own way... He's no idea of politics..."

"Don't you worry, Iuli... You..."

"I..." she said with a faint smile... "I..."

"Come now... come now..."

In the sallow face framed in by the grey locks of her hair the eyes alone still looked alive.

"Iulia, please... A few days only and... At Jassy, the Soviet Army seems to have begun the offensive."

"Oh, at least till then," she sighed.

Jurca took her cold hand.

"Be brave, Iuli."

But she had fallen asleep.

Jurca passed his fingers over her face, without touching it, then, bending over, kissed her cold wet forehead lightly and tiptoed out.

Holtzmann was in the doorway; short of stature and pale, he was so thin now that his once perfectly fitting grey suit was hanging loosely around him.

"Got your papers ?"

"Yes. I'm Petre Ivaşcu, a clerk from Tîrgovişte," said Jurca.

He was feeling cold, although the day had dawned and the night had been warm. He held out to Holtzmann his hand with outspread fingers, took hold of his skinny palm and squeezed it powerfully.

"Good luck, Ion."

"Good luck, Comrade Jurca."

The streets of the quarter were deserted at that early hour, except for a small milk-cart standing in front of a fine looking house. The horse, a thin jade, with its bones showing under its skin, almost seemed to be resting its muzzle in the dust. As he walked past, Jurca swept his fingers idly over its bony withers. Emerging into the boulevard, he was lost in the stream of workers on their way to the factory. He quickened his step, very vexed. He had not come the right way, he should have taken another. Now someone might recognize him. A taxi-cab drove slowly past him. He did not take it and, pulling his hat down over his forehead, went on with long strides, his eyes fixed on the pavement. Ten minutes later a taxi drove towards him. Jurca jumped off the pavement and motioned to it; before the car had actually stopped, he opened the door, jumped in and sat down on the dirty plush seat.

"So early, sir," said the driver joking and making a funny face. "Been on the spree with ladies, eh?"

"Oh no," said Jurca indignant, then quickly, uneasily: "What? Does it show?"

"Of course it does! I'm an expert." And the driver turned to look at him. He was a fair young chap with just a shadow of a moustache. "It's my trade; in the morning I collect the gentlemen in a hurry to reach home. Where to?"

"Oh, Duca Street."

"Right ho! How shall I drive? Fast or slow? You know, your tummy..."

"Go ahead, and don't you worry about my tummy! I've been busy at the office."

"Were you indeed?"

The driver saw through his small looking-glass that his customer had sunk slowly into a corner, with his hat fallen over his eyes, and he heard a slight snore.

"You glutted swine!" he swore. "In times like these..."

Jurca was trying to keep his mind off the conference by thinking of all kinds of things: 'Poor dear Iulia!' He drew up a plan rapidly. Now, no matter what happened, she would have to be taken to a hospital. He would talk to Murgescu. Slowly, imperceptibly, he turned round and looked out of the back window. The road behind them

was deserted and the villas they were driving past had their shutters drawn. The sky was grey. The sun had not risen yet. He looked at the numbers. 84... 86... 88... 90... 92... 94! The next. He hiccoughed.

"Stop!" he called out with an effort. "Driver! Stop a little!"

"If you're sick, get out," said the worried driver. "I don't want to have to clean up after you."

Jurca just glanced at the villa — one storey and a round cupola — the small garden smothered in the foliage that also climbed up the walls covering the entire building.

"I feel better," he whispered. "Go on, go on." And after a while: "Take the first turning to the left."

He knew the quarter very well... The by-street the car had taken ended in a small square lined with poplars. From there the driver could go straight on, without turning back to take the road they had come by.

"That's it," he said. "Stop! Here we are... We shan't stop quite in front. You understand!... The office..."

"Of course I do! There we are," and the driver opened the door, trying to help him out in case he felt dizzy.

Jurca fumbled in his pockets, produced two hundred-lei notes, crushed them in his fist and handed them to the driver:

"There you are!"

As he had foreseen, the car drove straight on, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake. Jurca went round the square and came out on the deserted thoroughfare. He had been very lucky. He crossed on to the side with even numbers and lit a cigarette. At No 96 the wrought-iron gate was unlocked. He pushed it open with his shoulder, then, after entering the narrow walk bordered with trees, he drew the bolt. He went past the front-door and through the garden. The villa belonged to an engineer who was out of town. He went up the steps of a terrace and rang four times sharply. The door was opened immediately, and Murgescu, wearing an old-fashioned but practically new blue suit, greeted him.

"Up to time, Comrade!" he said with a broad laugh, holding out his hand. "I too have just arrived... Do you think we'll come to an understanding with them?"

"We'll see..."

Jurca walked along an oak-panelled corridor. Turning to the left they went through a black-tiled bath-room. He was glad the talk would deal with concrete things and that they would not need lose themselves in general discussions on attitudes and methods.

"Here," whispered Murgescu opening a glass door fo an opaque blue colour.

They entered a drawing-room lit by a miniature chandelier. When they came in, two men rose to their feet: Baron Papp wearing a black frock-coat and striped trousers, and General Mîndru draped in some sort of tunic with many pockets.

"Mr. Ivaşcu," Murgescu said introducing him. Instead of a greeting, the baron muttered, hardly opening his thin lips:

"All measures of precaution have been taken. Please, take a seat and make yourself comfortable."

General Mîndru was vainly trying to get his monocle into his perspiring socket. It was the first time in his life that he was meeting a communist leader, and he did not know how to behave. Papp had only said: "My dear Onoriu, we have to try and negotiate. Otherwise who knows what those maximalists might do. We must absolutely find out what their intentions are." The general coughed impressively, leaning back in an arm-chair that creaked plaintively under his considerable weight.

Baron Papp sat down near him on a hard chair, motioning to the other two to take the arm-chairs on the other side of the desk. Jurca realized at once what was intended. The baron was to sit at the desk, looking as if he were presiding. Jurca did not smile.

"It's going to be hot today," moaned the general. Then, turning to the baron: "Romi, my dear fellow, has the villa a shelter?"

"It has."

Papp minutely arranged his gold cuff-links. He bowed his head and examined Jurca from under his eyebrows. 'Oh, what a face!' he thought puzzled. 'An intellectual... One of those hotheads, a maker of rebellious speeches.' He remembered the unpleasantness he had had when

the National-Peasant Party had canvassed together with them at elections. A stiff lot!

"Well then," he began, "the special situation we are in renders our talks and the decisions we shall come to, very important."

"Quite so," nodded Murgescu. It was now only that Jurca noticed he was wearing a blue dotted bow-tie.

"To come to the point, we must discuss the removal of the factory and the steps that must be taken by the opposition. Do you agree, gentlemen?"

"Yes, of course," said Murgescu.

"And Mr. Ivașcu... You said Ivașcu, didn't you?"

"I agree... on principle."

'What does he mean by "on principle"? What does he want to say?' General Mîndru was racking his brains to discover.

"We shall then stick to this matter only."

"I do not think it will be sufficient. The attitude concerning the removal of the factory is but a first step. It is one side of the general situation. A joint effort is now required."

"Obviously," said Murgescu to support him.

"Those are the mysteries of the future," said Papp lifting up his finger. "Here is what I propose: we must sign a detailed memorandum which shall be sent to the Marshal. Prior to this, a vast action must be carried on very cautiously: we have to explain matters to the public opinion through the 'Tribuna Romînă' and through leaflets. All social classes must be represented and particularly the leaders of the public life of the district."

He stopped, staring at Jurca. 'Why doesn't the fellow say anything? Sits there as dumb as a fish.'

"And what practical result do you expect the 'memorandum' will have?" asked Jurca breaking the silence. "This is what concerns us in the first place!"

"What result? We shall hereby prove our opposition against..."

"Quite... quite!" said General Mîndru gesticulating lazily.

"According to our information," said Jurca, "all the installations in Moldavia have been dismantled. They are on the way to Germany. What makes you think that

that cad of Antonescu will be impressed by... the 'memorandum'?"

The baron was beginning to lose his temper. One could not talk with these people... he knew it. Well, never mind. The day would come when...

"We must show our attitude clearly," he said very determinedly, and thought angrily: 'What have you got to say to this, you communist?'

"We quite agree to this, from the very beginning. This is the aim of our interview. The question is, how are we going to show our attitude?"

"As a matter of fact," put in General Mîndru pompously, "the hour of Germany's collapse is not quite so near. With two divisions..." He saw Papp frowning and concluded quickly: "Very much could be done with two divisions!"

The baron dwelt lengthily on the necessity of proving to the Allies that in this country, even during the dictatorship, there had existed forces that opposed the regime, that democracy, although suppressed, had not capitulated and that Antonescu "maintained his position by terror only."

Jurca frowned. It was what he had feared. They did not care about the factory; they wanted only to put on a good show, at the last minute. They had not thought of "protesting" so many years, they had never made a gesture.

Papp sat silently and waited:

'What does the fellow want? Murgescu's a ninny and they've got round him."

"I'm waiting to hear your opinion," said the baron drily.

"In the first place we agreed that we had to start an action," said Jurca. "In the second we've got to see what this action will actually consist of. For us the thing is quite clear." He paused, then went on stressing every word: "We shall not allow the most important factory in the town to be dismantled."

"But if it is bombarded?" put in General Mîndru.

"Then we'll rebuild it."

"What? Do what? I don't seem to have understood," snapped Papp. "You mean you will rebuild it that it may go on manufacturing bombs for the Germans?"

"We shall rebuild it after our liberation by the Soviet Army," went on Jurca calmly. "But on no account shall we let thousands of workers go without work or, worse still, be driven like cattle to Germany."

"So then?" Papp put in very much at a loss.

Jurca answered after a pause:

"We shall oppose it."

"What with? How?" giggled the baron. But Jurca made no answer. Papp felt he was getting angry. "What do you propose?" he asked.

Jurca answered very distinctly:

"A vast mass action, public meetings, demonstrations if necessary, the rallying of..."

"You mean... a revolution?" said the baron starting, almost terrified. "Implying all the consequences: reprisals, hostages, executions?"

"You forget this isn't 1942 and the front is at Jassy!"

"The Carpathians are an impregnable fortress," recited General Mîndru sententiously. "With a small number of divisions, two or three... sorry!" he apologized, feeling the baron was kicking him under the table.

"Are you opposed to our memorandum?" asked Papp.

"Of course, we aren't."

"And will you sign it?"

"How?" laughed Jurca no longer able to control himself. "In the name of the Communist Party?" (This was the first time those two words were being uttered and the others said nothing, embarrassed.)

"No, of course not... but..."

"I'm afraid we could not do it personally either," remarked Jurca guilelessly. "Because... after all... it's underground work..."

The baron rose stiffly.

"As for me, I declare on behalf of the district leadership of the party, I cannot accept your proposals. I am too old to go about carrying a gun. As always, we are against disturbances that cause justified reprisals. Especially now it is not advisable to stir up spirits which are quite sufficiently irritated already. We shall set to work as much as the laws permit, and in compliance with the laws. We have nothing in common with turbulence." ('His face

betrays no disappointment, no disillusion; what does the fellow think? Whoever is he?')

Jurca rose to his feet.

"Sorry we haven't been able to reach an understanding."

"What are we to infer from this?"

"That the factory shall not be dismantled!"

The baron made a movement as though to go nearer him, but he suddenly stiffened his shoulders and asked:

"In the event of... new circumstances arising... where can you be found?"

Jurca burst out into a roar of laughter.

"Good day!"

When he was in the street he examined his watch. At nine he had an appointment with Bota's liaison-man for the arms. 'Things are clear,' he said to himself. 'Just as I had expected. Opposition with observance of the law; action, mere words, lies and... to hell with the lot of them! Well, no matter! We'll see how things develop.'

When he passed a stall where the newly printed papers were just being sorted, he saw, without stopping to read attentively, the military *communiqué* announcing that on the Jassy front great movements of Soviet troops had begun. A feeling of great joy seized him. He scanned the faces of some people who were reading the paper as they walked along: a distinguished gentleman with a white goatee was pursing his lips; a housewife bought it and wrapped it round a bunch of leeks; a mechanic wearing overalls blinked as though to himself. Jurca motioned to a taxi.

The cigarette he smoked during the drive seemed to him as luscious as in peace time.

*

The next morning, after having packed the furniture, attaching a detailed inventory to every case, Varga awoke still dead-tired after the effort, the back of his hands skinned and a sharp pain in his back. The house, now topsy-turvy, frightened him. Forgetting to take his morning bath, he took up his station by the phone and after a quarter of an hour managed to get in touch with Orban the station-

master. The latter promised he would give him a closed goods wagon that very day. Varga tried to find something to do, in order to forget his dreadful talk with Benea. His wife, her thin, colourless hair in curl-papers, kept fussing around him, in a flurry. Something was worrying her and she could not help asking him some time after, as cautiously as she could:

"Salvator... is Mlle Laugier coming with us?"

"Of course she is," came his surprised answer. "We could not very well leave her here alone, could we?" Then, seeing her suspicious, hostile look, he roared: "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Mrs. Varga said nothing and turned her back on him. The presence of this Frenchwoman in her house was a permanent torture. She had come to this town in 1942, to find a job as a governess. She had created a sensation, as she represented for the bigwigs, who welcomed her with open arms, the image of poor martyrized France. She was very unhappy. She was a distant relation of the French consul and, when the latter had made a hurried departure, she felt utterly lost. It had been at the time of the Iron Guard movement, when everything had been in a state of utter confusion. She related, with tears in her lovely velvety eyes, a real novel: how she had wandered about the foreign town, how she had wanted to throw herself into the Dîmbovița but had got from a family a letter of introduction to General Belega, *un vieil et grand ami de la France*... But the general's wife had thrown her out after a week, and Varga, deeply moved by her distress, had taken her into their house 'so that the boys should have someone to talk French to...'

Mrs. Varga hated her like poison, and Lucian too could not stand her. Teddie alone had desperately tried to make love to her, but Larisse was very serious and had put him in his place. She was a silent young woman, always sad. Mrs. Varga suspected there was something between her and her husband, but she had never managed to catch them. Then, in a rage, she had said to herself that the mysterious woman must certainly be a spy of the Intelligence Service, and she nagged at her husband to get rid of her to avoid a catastrophe.

"We're the laughing-stock of society, Salvator. How is it you don't understand? Our children are too old to have a nurse-maid of twenty-two."

"How can you be so heartless?" he would answer indignantly. Suppose our children were ever in such a plight... A girl, Sofica. A mere girl... And then she pays for her board. (Mademoiselle Laugier had started giving French and English lessons in town.)

And now they were to take her with them to Moneasa!

At any other time Varga would have thought twice over his wife's mute indignation. Now, it did not even dawn on him that she might be displeased.

About eleven, passing through Lucian's room, he found him in bed, looking rather pale.

"What's the matter?" asked Varga rather worried. "Where were you all day yesterday?"

Lucian did not answer. Varga went near him and laid his hand on his forehead, doctor-like. It was burning-hot.

"My God! You're ill!" he exclaimed in alarm. "Now then, what next, I wonder? I must send for a doctor immediately... Just when we're leaving for Moneasa..."

"I'm not going anywhere," said Lucian slowly. "I'm not leaving."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Varga astounded. "Do you too want to be a source of unpleasantness for me?..."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not going," said Lucian stubbornly. Varga turned red, the veins on his temples started throbbing, but he controlled himself. The boy was ill. He went out to send for Doctor Borza, but at that very moment the telephone rang.

"Hello! Who is it? What? You, baron? And how are you feeling after the operation? Is everything all right?"

"Oh yes, quite all right. How are you?"

"I'm preparing to leave. I've packed everything in the house."

"What are you talking about? Where are you going to?"

"Why, sir, to Moneasa, to our house there... The situation is so..."

"Let me give you a piece of advice — and the words, uttered loud, at long intervals, seemed to flow into his

ears — do not move one step! D'ye hear me? Not one step!"

"Why, but..."

"Take your car and come here right away... Yes, I'm at home. Do not, on any account, think of leaving."

"But..."

"Send your family away, the children, your dear lady, but you mustn't leave, by any means!"

"Has anything happened?"

"Something *will* happen. Come here! Have I got to beg you?"

Varga remained standing for a while, the receiver in his hand. From the doorway of the untidy room his wife was looking at him, bewildered.

"What is it, Salvator?"

"Nothing," he faltered. "I think that... that I shan't be able to leave."

"Then we shan't go either. I'll start unpacking."

"Don't start doing anything!" shouted Varga turning purple. "Don't start doing anything, d'you hear? I am the head of this house! Why, shall I ruin my future, the children's, ours, for the whims of your jealous mind? I'm fed up with you!" he bellowed frantically, then collapsed on a chair, pressing his fingers convulsively against his temples.

"Salvator!" and tears came into his wife's eyes. "Salvator!" And to herself: 'Now he's acting! All right, I'll take that shameless hussy along with us!'

With trembling hands, Varga started dressing. He could hardly knot his tie. When he passed through Lucian's room, he saw the boy was still in bed, his face buried in his pillows, his shoulders shaking with sobs. Controlling his anger, he refrained from saying anything to him. In the drawing-room Teddie was playing the piano, his foot on the loud pedal.

"Stop that racket!" roared Varga banging the door against the wall. "This is a lunatic asylum! You've all taken leave of your common sense—your mother, your hysterical brother and you too. I'll go away and leave the whole lot of you. I'll go... to hell!"

It was sultry out of doors and the air was unbreathable. When Varga reached Papp's house, he was dripping with

perspiration and the coolness of the house made him sneeze. The baron was lying in bed, on a huge heap of heavy down-pillows, wearing a cap on his head and a thick woollen muffler round his neck. He had a fire in the stove, and Varga felt dizzy with the heavy smell of medecine and the old man's body. He wanted to say to the baron some of the commonplace phrases suited to such occasions, but the latter interrupted him from the very first, talking in an unnaturally clear voice for a man who had been operated just a few days before.

"Running away? Now? Sit down!"

Varga sank into a chair by the bed. He was so undone that he could have wept.

"Listen to me, Salvator. These moments are decisive. One false step and... we're done for! In our hands lies the responsibility of the country's fate. The offensive has started on the Jassy front. The papers say we're resisting, but from my information I can tell you exactly that in a week's time at the most the Russians will reach the outskirts of Bucharest."

"Oh!" was all that Varga managed to articulate.

"So that's that. The communists are ready to start a revolution. And while this is going on, you're thinking of fleeing?"

Those words increased Varga's desire to disappear. However, he answered slowly:

"I didn't know that... I hadn't the faintest idea... As the situation looked yesterday, it might have lasted for a few..."

"Nonsense!" said the baron harshly. "D'you think you can teach me what a 'strategical retreat' means? Now listen: in this whole town there is not a single man who... who enjoys more prestige than yourself."

"Oh, baron!" said Varga startled, wondering what it all meant.

"Yes. The others — Motzeanu, Pordea and company — are a bunch of windbags as people at Bucharest would call them. As for me... I'm an old man... old and ill... Our friends have always spoken well of you, and I've done my utmost to make them forget... the affair with Iorga, God rest his soul, but he is where he deserves to

be! Gyula Maniu himself appreciates you highly and has told me so many a time. And you know that he..."

"Does he really?" said Varga with a flattered smile.

"Now, listen to me: this morning I had a talk with the leader of the communists of this district."

Varga had the feeling he was standing on a heap of sand that had sunk all of a sudden. Not a sound came from his pale lips.

"Yes," went on the baron, obviously delighted. He reached out to the night-table, took a chocolate, sniffed it and threw it into his mouth. "We did not come to an understanding. They want an armed insurrection, a red revolution, that's what they want. So that, for the moment, we are between these two alternatives: the Germans — and we simply must do something or we have to leave the political arena without a hope of ever returning to it — and the Bolsheviks, whom we'll have to control, or they'll ruin us or murder us the moment the Russians enter the town."

"And I? What am I to do?"

"You sit quietly on your seat. You're my right hand. Motzeanu, Guiașiu, Spinanțiu are not worth a farthing." The old man sat up in bed, his forefinger pointing at Varga, and ordered: "Let Mrs. Varga and the bairns leave, but you must stay here! Now, good-bye. You may go now... and not a single word to anyone. We're playing the greatest game in the whole history of the party, you runaway, you!"

In the street Varga was quite unable to think. 'So, that was it, with the communists... And the police knew all about it! His right hand!'

He met Vîslan who did not notice him. He was drunk and could hardly stand. He had vomited and the breast of his coat was all soiled. Varga watched him, disgusted, but remembered that he himself did not look any better. He had no right to go about like that, he who was to play such a great role. He was grateful to the baron, but not wholly. It was very nice to learn that the head of the party organization admitted his last hour had struck and that it was time for him to give up his place to someone else. It meant the situation was serious, it required younger heads. He reviewed the position in his mind: whom could he trust? Father Potra, no doubt. He was a *habitué* of

their house, and a priest has always more prestige with the masses than an intellectual; Guiaşiu, if he knows how to handle him and make allowance for his pride; the younger men will soon pass over to him: they always sided with whoever was at the head of the hierarchic pyramid. And he would stay here alone. Alone with Larisse! She would, of course, refuse to leave; she had lessons in town, could not leave her pupils. Poor soul, she was a prisoner.

He told his wife who was waiting anxiously for him:

"It is just as I had foreseen, my dear. You'll have to leave without me!" He frowned and added mysteriously: "Terrible, terrible things will be happening here!"

"Salvator!" moaned his wife. She wept and tears made her face look repulsive. "Lucian is seriously ill. His fever has gone up to forty degrees centigrade and he is raving... We cannot leave. How could we take him when he's so ill? My God! Oh, Lord! what a mother must suffer!"

Varga could not do anything but ring up Doctor Borza and beg him to come at once. Then he rang up the station but no one answered. He was beside himself with rage and dialled the number several times. He wanted to tell them he did not need the wagon before two or three days. No answer. Finally a voice shaking with fear roared:

"Who are you? What the devil do you want?"

"It's Mr. Varga speaking!" he answered in an angry but dignified tone. "How dare you..."

"I'm sorry," stammered the station-master. "I'm sorry ... There's a riot on here." He rang off.

Varga remained dumbfounded.

*

A goods train with twenty-five wagons had stopped on the main line, and the puffing engine was taking its water supply. Then it was detached and taken to the engine-shed to be examined. Octavian Sabin walked across the bomb-riddled platform, carrying a large file which he had to hand in to the postmaster. He walked round a heap of stones that had been gathered and piled up, and then along the wagons. He felt very hot. He noticed the doors of the wagons were stopped with boards and the windows with wire netting. At the other end of the

train a German sentry was pacing up and down, with fixed bayonet. Sabin stopped and wondered. At that moment from the wagon came the shuffling noise of bodies moving, and the pale distorted face of a lad of Andrei's age appeared behind the bars:

"Hey, comrade — he begged — give us a bit of bread. We're starving!"

"But who are you?" asked Sabin, suddenly very attentive. He was interested in everything and, unless he probed into everything, he would feel uneasy for days, like a man that has not done his duty.

"We're apprentices and we're being taken to Germany," said the youth weeping. "Some have signed a kind of contract, the others were taken just so... Oh dear me, dear me!..."

"*Halt! Wer da?*" bawled the German sentry and started running towards Sabin.

Sabin remembered very clearly a similar scene he had witnessed at Timişoara in 1940. Whole trainfuls of Serbian prisoners passing through the station, and the poor devils starving and begging the passengers to give them a bite of food. A lot of loaves had been thrown into the sealed goods wagons, and there had very nearly been a scuffle with a fat *Feldwebel* who had considered this as a fraternization with the prisoners. And now, these were young Rumanians! And starving!

"What do you want?" asked the German soldier when he came up to him.

He was young and fair, wore spectacles and was as thin as a lath. With one blow of his fist Sabin could have sent him reeling.

"Mind your own business," he said under his breath. "Where are you taking them to? And why the devil don't you give them food? Why, haven't you plundered us enough, you swine?" He pointed at the wagon whence cries of: "Where are we? What station is it?" were heard.

"Ho! Food!"

"What station is it?"

"Don't you hear?" snapped Sabin to the astounded German. "*Hunger! Hunger!*"

"*Ach so!*" * laughed the soldier. "*Ich bin auch hungrig.*" ** And his face flushed crimson, he snatched the gun from his shoulder: "*Plekat!* *** *Schnell. Schnell!*" ****

Sabin turned and ran to the goods storehouse. He entered like a whirlwind and caught sight of Andrei who had come to the station with his luggage. He was leaving for the country with his mother in the afternoon. Sabin's anger had long since blown over, but he did not want to show his son he had forgiven him. He had talked to the headmaster, Mr. Viniciu Lucaci, who had praised Andrei:

"He is a fine boy, Mr. Sabin. I'm terribly sorry I was unable to save him, but do not worry. I shall do my best... and..." (whispering the rest into his ear) "they will go to the devil, very soon too. Your son's had more courage than we, the old ones. Tell him I think very highly of him."

That had been enough to drive away Sabin's last shred of anger. He was only sorry that he could not tell Andrei he was no longer sore about it, lest his prestige be impaired.

"Here again?" he shouted. "You always come here when there's a row."

"But we're leaving in the afternoon and I had to bring the luggage."

"All right... all right... stay here... or no, you'd better go home." Sabin turned to the other clerks and started calling:

"Hey, Caba!"

"Here."

"Tureac! Murgu! Vasalie! Get out all the money you've got on you and make it snappy. A train with lads of ours has just arrived. They're being taken to Germany and are starving."

"... Caba, run up and buy bread! Get it on tick too, tell them it's for Mr. Sabin."

Andrei laid down the bag.

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* So that's it!
** I'm also hungry
*** In bad Rumanian: You away go!
**** In German: Quickly. Quickly!

"What's up?"

"It's none of your business," Sabin said crossly. "Go home!"

As a matter of fact he was quite pleased Andrei was present. He did not want the boy to think he was a coward, incapable of doing his duty when the time for it came.

He rushed to the phone and rang up every department, one after the other.

He said the same thing to each of them:

"To hell with all your musty papers! There's a train with lads of ours, young Rumanians. They're being taken to Germany and are starving... Buy up all there is at the refreshment stall and let's help them! They're our own sons, aren't they?" Then he turned to Andrei: "Didn't mother give you any money?"

"Yes, for the tickets."

"Go too and buy up anything you find."

"You see, but..." He wanted to say it was the last money in the house. But Sabin cut him short:

"Go, I tell you. Father will borrow, don't you worry."

Andrei went out into the square in front of the station. At the baker's in the corner people had queued up; there was quite a crush.

"Why, but what about coupons?" cried the salesman in despair. When he heard what it was all about, he started throwing loaves over the people's heads. "Come on, take them and hand in the money!..."

The moment Andrei took his place in the queue, somebody pulled him by his coat-sleeve:

"What's going on here, my boy?"

He turned and saw an elderly man dressed in overalls, with a silvery bristly moustache and lively grey eyes. Andrei told him briefly what was on. The old man said nothing, but took to his heels along the street.

When Andrei entered the station with his arms full of big brown loaves, the platform was swarming with people. His father, in the middle of a group, was bustling about and waving his hands. His red face was shiny as if smeared with grease:

"Not pleased with plundering all we have, they're taking away our children too! We deserve to be treated

so, for we're fools; we hold our tongues and bear it all."

That moment he was thinking of Andrei and wondering what he would do if they took him away suddenly and sent him where he would never be able to see him again. How did they feel, the parents of the children locked up in the sealed train?

From the trucks cries rang out:

"We don't want to go... We were tricked!"

"We didn't sign anything!"

"Mother!" rang shrilly a thin, broken childish voice.

All the railwaymen, the clerks, had left their offices and crowded around the train. Andrei slipped in among them and went up to Octavian. The latter's eyes were full of tears. He laid his hand on Andrei's arm and squeezed it tight:

"Climb up on my shoulder and give them this bread."

He stiffened his legs and helped Andrei to climb up. Caba cried:

"Hey, you, give me an iron bar or something else for Master Andrei to break open the wire netting!"

When Andrei's face got to the height of the window, he was struck by a stink of unwashed bodies, urine and excrements. From inside he heard:

"Wait... wait till I climb..."

Andrei felt that someone was handing him a piece of iron and with two blows he broke open the wire netting. A hand, black with filth, with thin twisted fingers like talons, snatched the bread from his hand, scratching him.

"Wait, wait," he cried. "I've got more! I'll give some to all of you, right away!"

From the other wagons came real howls.

"Am I not too heavy for you, father?" Andrei asked Sabin who answered in a stifled voice:

"No, no... don't worry about father..."

When he bent down to pick up other loaves, Andrei saw a crowd of workers armed with crow-bars coming from the engine-shed.

The old man, whom he had spoken to in front of the baker's, crept under the carriage and, elbowing his way, pushed the crowd aside.

"You're feeding them like piglets in a sty! Get them out, hang it all! Couldn't you have thought of it?"

He lifted his crow-bar and started striking the big iron padlock.

Andrei jumped down from his father's shoulders, saying: "He's right!"

That moment the stamping of top-boots was heard, and six German soldiers with trailing rifles were running towards them. At their head was a very smart young officer who, running at full speed, was unfastening his pistol holster with his gloved hand.

"O — o — o — o!" shouted the crowd.

Sabin elbowed his way forward.

"Wait!" he cried. "I shall speak to them. I know German..." And when he finally managed to get in front of the officer, he shouted right into his face: "Go to hell to your own homes in your *Vaterland* and steal people's children over there!"

"*Was sagen Sie, bitte?*" * asked the officer, his eyes bulging out of his head. Then, seeing the second wagon forced open, he roared: "*Zurück!*" **

"You go back!" yelled Sabin and, when the officer caught him by the lapels of his coat, he thrust out his fist into the officer's face. Andrei, all aghast, saw the officer take out his pistol; the boy rushed blindly on, pushing aside the people in front of him. The stream of people rocked for a while; Sabin, pushed forward from behind, collided with the officer who, taken by surprise, dropped his revolver. Scores of feet trampled it, burying it into the cinders between the sleepers. The bewildered soldiers did not know what to do. One of them lifted his gun and shot in the air.

"What? You're shooting us now?"

"Our allies are killing us, men!"

"Go for them!"

"Oh!"

A hand was brandishing an iron bar above the heads, and the soldiers, not daring to fire, were retreating step by step, warding off the blows with the butts of their guns.

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* What is it you say, please?

** Back!

"Home! Let them go home!" cried Sabin purple in the face, his eyes starting from their sockets. He saw Andrei near him and his irritation increased. "Open the wagons, lads!"

"Don't you worry," answered a tall worker, black with soot. Unable to break open the padlock, he had started smashing the boards of the wagon.

The young men who got out were passed between the line of men and pushed from hand to hand until out of the station. Only one of them, a tall fair youth, with a narrow forehead covered by wisps of hair, protested:

"Why have you butted in? I want to go."

Someone boxed his ears and then they all rushed at him. Old Jurca leapt into the wriggling crush of bodies and, distributing many a blow right and left, dragged the beaten boy out.

"Off with you!" he said contemptuously. "Don't you see there are others who don't want to go, you ass? When those will have been taken out, you may come back. Scram!"

Because of the crush on the platform, one could not see anything. A group of gendarmes came at a run and tried to open up a path, striking with the butts of their rifles. The crowd turned against them.

Andrei felt a heavy blow on his shoulder and staggered. His father bellowed and, gripping the soldier, pushed him violently against the wall. His gun fell down at a distance, among the people's feet.

"*Feuer! Feuer!*"* roared the German officer hoarsely. But the soldiers, pressed near the wall, could not handle their weapons. A sharp clatter was heard — rap, rap. It was the crow-bars colliding with the rifles.

A gendarmerie officer was making funny gestures with his white-gloved hands. His cries could not be heard, but suddenly the tall figure of the stoker appeared beside him.

"You want to fire at Rumanians, you swine? Rouse your men against us? Defending the Germans, aren't you?"

"Orders..." stammered the officer.

"Orders, you said? Hey, soldiers!" he shouted putting his hands to his mouth like a funnel. "Wait, comrades!

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* Fire

They won't kill us for having saved some youngsters from the claws of the fascists, will they? Wait, men!"

The soldiers stopped for a second, and that was enough for the people to sweep them all aside.

"Bolshe..." said the officer through his teeth, but the stoker pushed him with his breast against the wall and hissed threateningly:

"Wait here, you fine fellow, or I'll punch your nose for you!"

In the meantime the wagons had been emptied. Then Orban, the station-master, who had fussed about impotently begging: "Good folk... good folk... have pity on me!" had a brain-wave. He ran up to the roof of the station, which was a mere platform erected hastily after the bombardment and, rushing to the anti-aircraft hooter, started turning its handle at full speed. The two soldiers, who were lying face downward watching the scuffle on the platform, turned in surprise. Without taking any notice of them, Orban went on turning the handle, and the long, piercing wail of the hooter came down in waves on the crush down on the platform. Two minutes later the hooters in the neighbourhood started sounding too, then those in town. In a second the platform was deserted; the gendarmes ran away in confusion to the big shelter of the station; the German officer alone, his tunic rent and one of his eyes as blue-black as a plum, stood gaping at his six soldiers whose tunics were hanging in tatters. One of them had had his forehead cracked by the blow of a crow-bar, and thick blackish blood streamed down his face.

The platform remained deserted, but Orban went on turning the handles of the hooter, like mad.

In the shelter near the storehouse the men could hardly breathe with indignation and with the crush.

"That was going too far."

"You'll see, they'll take us away too. That's what they did in the Ukraine, when they retreated."

"If we let ourselves be taken!" roared Sabin.

Andrei's shoulder was stiff with the blow of the rifle butt. It hurt very badly.

"They want to dismantle the factory!" cried the elderly worker who had brought the others to the station.

"How's that?" someone asked.

"Just so! A German commission has come..."

"It can't be true!"

"What? You think they wouldn't dare do it? These people drain the places they go to. They're like locusts."

"Where do you come from, sonny?" the stoker said to one of the youths who had entered the shelter.

"I'm from Brăila... From the apprentices' school," answered the youth shaking with fatigue and excitement. "They took us all to pre-military training... They made us sign some papers. Those who refused were beaten to death."

"If we don't stand up to them!" Sabin kept saying.

"They did not even let those of us who lived in the same town go home. They kept us for one day in the barracks until they filled up some papers, then got us into the train. At Bucharest they gave us some brown bread. It has been hell!"

Andrei stroked his swollen shoulder. Every time his finger pressed it, a sharp pain shot through his whole body. He laughed.

"Well, father! That was some fight!"

His mirth was contagious. Around him everybody was smiling, satisfied.

"We gave them a first-class *blitz*, didn't we?"

"What are we going to do with these boys?" someone asked.

"Oh, we shan't forsake them," said Sabin, "We'll collect money in town, give it them and send them off home."

"Listen here," said someone. "I think we'd better get out of this shelter. There's no sound of planes and the police are certainly on their way here. They'll catch us like mice in a trap."

"Not a bad idea, Uncle Mihai," added the stoker. "Come on, brothers... We'll take the boys to the workshops — shan't we?"

They flocked out together. The station was deserted. They looked up. No sign of any plane.

"Come on, boys!" Uncle Jurca was hurrying them. "Scatter!"

"Go home, Andrei," Sabin advised his son. "Tell mother you gave me the money to get the tickets. You'll leave in the evening. By the eight o'clock slow train."

"What about you?"

"I'll ask to be sent somewhere," he said looking rather worried. "You know, it wouldn't do to stay on here. There'll be a terrible kick up..."

"Don't be sorry, father!" said Andrei grimacing. He could hardly move because of the pain, but felt better than ever.

"Me? Be sorry? We taught them a lesson." He was silent for a while, then went on, his head turned away. "You know, I spoke to the headmaster of your school. He said he would do his best to get you taken back. He appreciates you greatly... Don't think father... Father is a good Rumanian and understands... That's it, dear ...Go home now."

*

Sonia was in the garden. She liked to hide among the prickly untended bushes. She would lie down in the grass, feeling the coolness of the earth through her thin and old dress, one of the dresses she had worn as a little girl and which she could not part with. Seen from below, the trees looked strange; their leaves were red because of the light. She did not want to read; she was happy as she was, she felt wrapped in peace and quiet. From somewhere came the noises of the street, the hooter of a car, a cry, a window opened...

She lay dreaming of lots of trivial things. She knew her mother disapproved of her; although she would not let her spoil her hands in the kitchen — no, not for the world, she would have liked to see her around her, being active in the house, taking an interest in housekeeping. But now she could never have stayed there, near the burning-hot kitchen-range, with her ears anxiously pricked up for the creaking of the gate. She knew Andrei would be coming: he had written her a note two days before. She was somewhat annoyed with herself, feeling she was waiting for him so impatiently, but she was so lonely...

Her attempt to make friends with Lucian had failed. Her friends laughed at her, saying she was certainly in love with some inaccessible young man, but Sonia answered them seriously that she loved no one. Once Andrei had asked in an irritated tone: "The man you could love, how ought he to be?" She had answered. "I don't know. I've never thought of it." Andrei had begun to laugh. "You will also fall in love one day. But I hope I shall be that man and shan't let you make a fool of yourself."

Sonia had not realized when she had grown up. One day, all of a sudden, she had a feeling that men had begun to feel disturbed near her. Her schoolmates would tell her about their small affairs (she did not know why they did), they asked for her advice, and she told them very seriously anything that crossed her mind. She had felt disturbed only once. Gipsy Belega had asked her: "Listen, is there anything between you and Andrei?" "No," she had answered in a somewhat changed voice. "Why?" "Nothing. I just asked."

Andrei was the only person whom she would have liked to be friends with. But only friends. He seemed to her to express always very clearly what she too had thought many a time, but she didn't have this feeling often, and the less so since the day when Andrei had told her, almost jokingly, that he loved her. Had he spoken in another tone, she would have taken him by the hand and told him she was very fond of him too. But Andrei's tone had had something alien, prying, which had hurt and offended her. She had said frigidly: "I don't love you. I care for you as a friend." "That sounds like a cheap novel," he had said bowing. "I quite understand." Since then, whenever she was with Andrei, despite all her efforts, Sonia had never been able to recapture the peace and happiness she had formerly felt. Now and again he would mention his "despised love" with a flippant air, as though making jest of himself. And since then he had become a truly good friend and listened willingly to all she had to say. But his thoughts seemed very far away and he avoided speaking about himself. Sometimes only, when she stole a furtive glance at him, Sonia noticed in his eyes a keen expectant gleam that he quickly concealed. When he had been expel-

led and in the girls' school they had talked about nothing else, Sonia realized he was quite different from what she had imagined. She thought that now, at last, she could help him, show him he was not alone — if only he had told her everything and come to her for help. But Andrei had gone away and Sonia tried hard not to think of him. Sometimes, while practising her piano, she would stop and something would clutch at her heart: she felt as if they had a tryst to keep, and she was late. She missed Andrei terribly. One day she thought: 'If he would tell me again ...'She blushed and felt the tears come to her eyes. She remembered a snapshot taken during a trip on which they had been together. She looked for it and, when she found it, was disappointed. Andrei under the shade of a tree was impersonating an Indian, a knife in his mouth. His head was small like the head of a match and did not resemble him in the least.

Instead of the long, affectionate letter she was looking forward to, she received a postcard from Andrei, telling her he was coming to town for a few days.

The news filled her with such joy that she thought of going to meet him at the station; on second thought — and she was sorry for it — she deemed it was not befitting.

That day she had wanted to drag Lucian out of his isolation, to take him to the river, to the sunshine, but her attempt failed.

She heard the gate creak, light steps on the gravel and Andrei's voice which thrilled her strangely:

"Good day, madam... Is Sonia in?"

She took up her book quickly and opened it, but the lines seemed to dance before her eyes. She could not understand a word. She heard only the throbbing of her heart. Then the leaves in front of her rustled.

"Sonia!"

She sprang to her feet, ashamed of her old short frock.

"Is that you? You've come?" ('What a silly question! I must look like a fool.')

He took her by the hand and looked into her eyes for a while. He was as sunburnt as a blackamoor, but Sonia felt he had changed. There was something new in the way he carried his head, in the look of his eyes, an assurance

he had not possessed before. 'Why? Why do I see all that?' she wondered. 'And why does he say nothing?'

Without letting her hand go, Andrei sat down on the grass. He winced. Her hand was very warm, even burning-hot, and her fingers seemed to be trembling lightly.

"Why haven't you written? You... scamp!"

"I hadn't the time, Sonia," answered Andrei seriously. This hurt her. Still she tried to smile.

"And what have you been doing?"

"Thinking."

"What about?"

"About life." Then he began to laugh and squeezed her hand. "Let's call a truce. I've missed you terribly, Sonia. I had so much to tell you."

'Well, go ahead,' she thought. 'What are you waiting for?' And she cast down her eyes.

"I too have felt lonely," she whispered.

"I haven't," answered Andrei and his green eyes shone. "This time I haven't."

"Something's happened to you," said Sonia thoughtfully. "You seem changed."

"Maybe," Andrei said nodding. "I wish I were..."

"Won't you tell me?"

'So she feels it,' thought Andrei. Everything around seemed lovely now: the grass, the untended trees, the sun. When he spoke, his voice was calm.

"What happened is that I have met men, Sonia. And I've understood a very simple thing... That life is not worth living any way. These were things I used to feel before too, rather dimly, but I did not waste any thoughts on them. My new friends thought I... well... that I was somebody..." He shook his head and grimaced: "Do you know why all I did before was stupid and grotesque?"

"I think I do," she murmured. "You must understand others too, Andrei." ('If you understood... if you understood ...now!')

"You're right," he said gravely. "I had never thought of it. I thought I was the salt of the earth... There's some kind of selfishness that makes one a coward, in the end."

"Will you always be like that?" asked Sonia almost with sorrow in her voice.

"How?" he asked surprised.

She looked at him attentively.

Certainly something had come into his life: he had made "a discovery," as he often did before, and now he was dying to speak about it to someone.

"Your head is in the clouds," she said to him softly.

"The blame is mine. The two of us... if we could have agreed..."

'But don't you see how anxious I am to understand you?' thought Sonia.

"The world we live in is ruled by a strange law," said Andrei. "When father had any unpleasantness with his bosses at the office, he would vent his anger at home... The repartees of our wounded dignity always fall somewhere else. That's how I was too... I strove to appear different from what I really was... Gradually this gets into the blood and one becomes a different man. You see, once you said to me: 'Let's be friends...' Now I say to you: Let's be friends, Sonia, but you know..." He began to laugh: "Genuine, real friendship, like an alliance between two honest-minded states!"

Sonia could hardly refrain from crying out: 'For God's sake Andrei, awake! Things are far simpler!' But his eyes were full of so sincere a light that, when she squeezed his hand, she felt she was far older than he.

Andrei was happy. He said:

"I'll write to you, Sonia, and tell you lots of things."

"Why? Are you leaving?"

"Yes. Today, at six."

"Must you go?"

"Yes, I must."

Without a word, Sonia nestled close to him. She heard his heart throbbing loudly as though in a vault. 'But why don't you understand, you silly?' Without looking up, she caressed his shoulders. Andrei moaned and she felt him shrinking.

"What is the matter?" she asked scared. Her face had become as white as a sheet.

"Nothing... I hurt my shoulder this morning."

"Let me see."

"No."

She did not listen to him. She opened his shirt. His whole shoulder was covered with a big, greenish-black stain.

"What have you been doing?" she cried terrified. "Come in and I'll apply a compress to it."

"Sonia... You needn't bother..."

She took him by the hand and dragged him inside. Her mother, a tall, still young but grey-haired woman, was putting small saucers with jam and glasses of water on a tray.

"I meant to bring it out to you," she said. Then to Andrei: "Did you hear what happened at the station this morning? Mr. Proca came... He said the Germans fired at the people, that there was a real revolution..."

"Oh, no!" answered Andrei. Then, remembering, added quickly: "I haven't the slightest idea..."

Mrs. Bucşan went out for fresh water and Sonia asked him in a hurry:

"You were there too, weren't you?"

He nodded. He was grateful to her for not asking any questions. Sonia soaked a handkerchief and bandaged his shoulder. Now it hurt so badly that he felt like howling.

"I must go, Sonia."

She saw him to the gate. She walked pensively and a little sad.

"Don't do anything silly," she said when they parted. "You are capable of anything."

"No fear..."

Sonia lifted her face to him. Andrei bent quickly, blushing and kissed her cheek. Then he went away with his usual buoyant gait, but when he turned the corner he stopped and leaned against the wall. He was nearly fainting.

At home he found his father looking very worried. The old man took him into the next room, so that his mother should not hear them, and told him that a great investigation had begun at the station. Some of the workers from the engine-shed, who had broken open the wagons, had been arrested. He had arranged to be sent on an inspection in the district and hoped that, by the time he returned, things would have blown over.

"Even if they aren't... hang it all. Listen, sonny, take it from me. By the first of August everything will be over with the Germans."

Andrei smiled. Every day his father brought home news that were certs: by the first of May the Americans would land with parachutes, or by July fifteenth the Russians would smash the German front.

"Father... I must tell you something..."

"What, my dear boy?"

"My shoulder hurts terribly... Look..." and he showed it to him.

The old man turned pale and said anxiously:

"Don't let mother see it in any case... Come to the doctor."

When they came out of Dr. Manstein's consulting-room, Andrei had his arm in a sling. The rifle-butt had cracked the bone. The doctor said it was nothing serious: in two or three weeks he would be well again. In the evening they left, all of them, accompanied by Iurcovici carrying the luggage.

In the train, Andrei, torpid with fever, stretched down on the seats. He thought how smoothly the friendship between him and Lucian had passed away. In return he had found Sonia. She had been right: real friendship is worth far more than youthful sentimental nonsense...

And maybe Ardeleanu...

Since they had met, they had seen each other every day. Immediately after lunch Andrei would start for the mill which was at the end of the village. All around everything was languid with the heat; the burning-hot air was dense and seemed to scorch the lungs. After passing the last houses, Andrei would stop and gaze for quite a while at the plain that looked as shiny as a mirror. At times, a faint gust of wind would slightly move the limply hanging branches of the trees. He would find Ardeleanu reading in the small garden, in the shade of the fence. After shaking hands, Andrei would sit down beside him, tired. They used to talk about war, about the people in the village... While listening to the mechanic, Andrei thought: 'How strange everything is... When I was a child, every defeat suffered by the Rumanians in the past hurt me... I would

cry at the thought that Stephen the Great had to bend his knee before his victorious foe at Colomeea and that Michael the Brave had been beaten at Mirăslău... Now it seems we'll be crushed, and yet, may God forgive me, I have the feeling that not I, but the world I was suffocating in...'

Sometimes, of an evening, some neighbours would drop in at Ardeleanu's to "talk politics." The mechanic would let them speak, talk about their worries; now and again he would put in a word, as though uttered casually.

Andrei remembered one of those talks. He had not forgotten it, for, at one moment, he had had the feeling that Ardeleanu had had something in his mind. There were a few men at his place; among them Hahăul's son, Gligor, a tall strong lad on furlough, and Pavel Curz, a man of about thirty who had returned from the war without one leg. They were both tortured by the same question: would Antonescu give them land after the war, as they had heard he had promised? Ardeleanu laughed.

"Where could he give them land from? From his own estate? Would it be enough?"

"But he promised to!" cried Gligor.

"Yes, indeed, he did promise he would give land in Russia," said Ardeleanu quibbling.

"As if we needed land there! That's not ours!" said Pavel Curz.

"There we have been used as manure," muttered Gligor. "Eh, you've no idea how many peasants perished there... numberless as the sand of the sea..."

"And how is he going to give us land in Russia when the Russians are beating us out?" asked the puzzled Pavel Curz. "Those were mere empty words, that's what they were, just to fool us."

"I think so too," smiled Ardeleanu.

Andrei stayed on till late at night, after the two had left.

"Yes!" said Ardeleanu pacing the earth floor of his low room. "That's what we have got to do: speak to the men, to the soldiers going to the front, especially to the young ones who have not been there yet. They are told all sort of rot: that the Russians cut off the ears of prisoners and blind them... It's a lie..."

"I know," said Andrei.

"But they don't and they go on fighting." He was silent, looking attentively at a corner of the room. He then turned and said gravely: "They must not fight. We have nothing against the Soviet people."

In a week their friendship had grown closer and closer. Ardeleanu told him the story of his life and revealed to him the dreadful life in workers' quarters where children at the age of ten have to work to earn their living.

"You see, it is easier for us to know what we've got to do! We're gnawed by hunger, and all live on our backs. And there's nothing left but either to bear it, to shut up and endure it, or to organize and fight for what we're entitled to!"

Ardeleanu had been in the village for two years and had made a lot of friends. He called to his place young men leaving for the front and told them not to fight because they had no reason to; better surrender to the Russians.

"You have a wireless," he had said to Andrei. "Listen in to Moscow and write down what you hear... Don't you see? The papers are full of filthy slanderous talk about the Soviet Union. We've got to use any means to receive the Russians as friends when they come."

Once Aunt Emilia had heard Andrei tell a lad, who had come to school for a certificate, that the Russians would win the war, and then only would people be given land. Terrified, she had asked him in whispers:

"My God, Andrei... you're not a communist, I hope, are you?"

He laughed.

"I don't think so. I just express my opinions aloud."

In the village, ever more men were being mobilized. Marcu Cloambeş's servant had left too. Every evening, when the post arrived, the peasants crowded round the mayor's office, anxious, silent. The postman would come out with a bundle of green orders and begin to call:

"Todor Miheş, Vasalie Trifan, Mihai Frenţ... no, not you — Flondrea's son!"

Cloambeş's son had been demobilized and his father had sent him away to Bucharest. On Sundays, when Father Ioja read out the names of the country's heroes, the church

rang with sobs. The women had to do all the work. They had become peevish; even Sergeant-major Gociman was frightened at them, since one had wanted to scald him. In the village something was brewing.

'No, this cannot last long,' Andrei said to himself. Not for a moment did he think that, if things changed, he might go back to school. The years he had spent at high school seemed very far and unreal. "I've learnt more in a few months than in all the time I was at school... The only thing that counts now is to live, to live with dignity... Standing upright... free..."

He did not regret not having met Lucian or Suslănescu. He was sorry for them and felt he would not have had anything to say to them.

*

General Belega did not go to Bucharest for the one simple reason: the thing he feared most would happen, did actually happen. A very high official from the Secret Police came down to investigate discreetly and, after having talked privately with the mayor and all the other high officials, locked himself up in Belega's office. The general tried to browbeat him, as officers are wont to do, but the official, whose name was Muzicescu, was not abashed. He was a stout man who looked so pale as though his fat were not covered by skin, but uncovered, shaking flabbily, as if about to drip off. His shrill eunuch-like voice irritated the general.

"Certain things have happened here which compel us to take severe and relentless measures. Now, on the eve of the final victory, how dare you act just as you please? Why do you hinder the German commission?"

"I?" said the general losing his temper. "Sir..." ('A lunatic!' he thought. 'Victory!')

"Come now... we have information. Have there been any disturbances? How many men have you shot? How many have you put in chains and pilloried in front of the Military Circle? Do you think that this... strange leniency can galvanize spirits? Well, I don't."

"Major Mertsch did not show me any paper that might..."

"We're at war," went on Muzicescu whose puffed-out jaws shook like jelly. "From day to day we're expecting the Jassy front to be crushed. Everything must be saved! The final victory won't be ours if we give way to panic." His small eyes shone almost merrily.

The general realized that the inspector was mad. He was afraid of him.

"I won't contradict you," he said unwittingly, as it were.

"That would be the last straw..." the inspector replied laughing shrilly like a little girl. "Our front in the Carpathians will not resist unless it is well supplied with ammunition. We have no anti-aircraft guns to defend the town. Everything has been concentrated at Ploești, and still it's not enough. Now then, what do you intend to do ? Hand over to the Russians a fully equipped plant ?"

"In case of retreat..." put in the general pedantically.

"Or blow it up that it be of no use to anyone. We must make full use of it ourselves! We must help the German commission as much as we can. In a few days the special team sent to dismantle the factory will arrive. It must be protected against any attack. How many Bolsheviks did you arrest after the incident at the station ?"

"In my capacity as prefect I do not deal personally with such things," the general answered, defying him, but aware all the same that he was not behaving wisely.

"Naturally. Still, you are informed, I expect."

"Yes. Mr. Benea reports to me every evening."

"In case... anything should happen... you will execute them at once."

"Only if I am given the sentence of the Court Martial!" answered the general tapping the table with his cigarette-case.

"General Belega!"

"Inspector Muzicescu!"

Muzicescu coughed several times like a cat, then smiled. His face puckered.

"What measures have been taken to gather the young men who escaped and send them off at once ?"

"Special agents are looking for them. They've been hidden away."

"What ?"

"Hidden away, I said!" roared the general. "Hang it all, I'm not speaking Chinese, am I ? The town is big enough and the people have hidden them. *C'est ça!*"

Muzicescu did not say any more. Fuming with rage, Belega realized he was risking his life now, but he could not stop. 'Like in Germany,' he thought enraged. 'The Nazis there have got the better of the Wehrmacht. That's why things are getting on so well! And now this fat lump wants to teach me!'

"Do you know what the opposition is doing ?"

"Yes"! answered Belega trembling slightly.

"Let them have their fun — I suppose you understand whom I mean. They're harmless — obviously, to a certain extent. In case anything happens... no pity! Before the firing squad! Moreover, Mr. Benea has got all necessary instructions. Now, General," he rose heavily, like a hippopotamus, "allow me to tell you one single thing, confidentially and unofficially: double dealing is a very risky game."

"I indignantly refuse to allow you to hint at such a thing! And I shall report to my chiefs the insolence with which... "

"I think you will do nothing of the kind," giggled Muzicescu going to the door, "and we better leave things as they are for the moment. A last piece of advice: it would be good if the Marshal had a concrete evidence that there is perfect order here, that all the Rumanian forces, *all*, I said, co-operate to help the country out of the impasse it is in. Please do not forget these words: the *concrete* evidence, grounded on facts, and *all* the Rumanian forces. I wish you a good day, General."

Left alone, Belega collapsed all at once. All this seemed to be a fiendish saraband, a large net in which he, a big strong fish, was vainly struggling. *Concrete* and *all.* In fact, that meant compromising the opposition. How ? By threats ? It couldn't be done. He was sure that, if he went to Papp, the latter would twist and twirl him so well that he would sink even lower. The old man was as well aware as he, Belega, was that the Axis was on its last legs. Then what ? Make use of diplomacy ? He was not good at it. He said to himself, vindictively, that the ministers of the

country must have lost their balance and, like drowning people, did not know what to clutch at. But, before sinking to the bottom, they had enough time and sufficient power to set an example... How had the fat lump put it? ... Yes... to wavering spirits... The general was afraid he would be the example.

*

Iulia Vlad collected her last strength and got out of bed. The house was deserted and the silence rang in her ears as waves do in a shell. From the tap left half turned on water was dripping. She heard every drop breaking in the tin sink; then it seemed to her as if the boards of the floor rose, sank down again, turned round, stopped and, immediately after this vision, everything was sheathed in utter darkness.

The blood throbbed sharply in her temples. The pain had ceased. She said to herself aloud: "I feel all right." Her voice was inaudible. She sat like that for a long time, leaning against the foot of the bed, and big tears, heavy and hot, ran down her cheeks. Could it be so hard? Until a few months ago she had never thought of it. Never. She had just lived. 'Come on,' she urged herself. 'Come on!'

Her clothes were on a chair by the bed. If only it did not start anew: first a sharp pain like a saw that would bend inside her, then a darkness full of ugly shadows. Iulia loved the light. Even the pale March sun, peeping through the bars as if through a sieve, had filled her with boundless joy. 'I must dress.'

Pitter, patter came from the tap. What a noise!

Gavril's last letter she had received... let me see... in 1938... Catalonia... Teruel... He wrote little, only a few words, but she knew them by heart, about the wonderful woman whose name was La Passionaria, Dolores, the sorrowful... a few lines of poetry from a song of theirs, *La bandera roja*, and many, many kisses... What does he look like now, I wonder? Still short of stature, sturdy and as hard as steel? Spain... Now he is certainly with the French partisans... Gavril could never die... He was eager

to know many languages... but he wasn't bright enough for that...

Now she must go. Poor Jurca, how he had aged! He was always so childish, just like his father... And what trouble she had with Uncle Mihai to get him to understand that he would have to be careful... Foreman Jurca, the head of the sabotage shock gang!... A year... almost a year had passed since she last saw him. What did he say ? Yes... 'Iulia, Lenin had a thin voice and could not pronounce his "r" s well. Oh, if you could have heard him once only...' Uncle Mihai usually just called him Vladimir Ilyich... You must do your duty. It is such a common thing to do your duty... And Gavril, when he left, had said only: 'My duty, Iuli.' Now, to do your duty is to go away, to find enough strength and go away... To walk along the whole street... further even... if possible. It means to do your duty... to your comrades, to the Party...

That was all. She was dressed. Her pain had seemed to have disappeared. 'Holtzmann had such a trouble in finding this small house! It is well situated, in a quiet quarter, has two entrances and they had dug a hiding-place in the cellar too.' She smiled softly... 'Poor Jurca did the digging by night...'

Now she had to go, for their sake, for the sake of all. She went near the chair. Yes, the pencil was there. She had asked Holtzmann for it yesterday. What should she write ? Just a few words; no use writing a lot. "My dears, my dear comrades..." What a lot this word says! So comprehensive and human, and so simple. She added: "Tell Gavril everything. He is sure to come. All my love. Farewell."

At first the sunshine blinded her and it seemed to her that numberless small red butterflies were dancing before her eyes, making her close her eyelids. But she soon opened them, embracing, in spite of the burning pain in her eyes, the low houses of the quarter, the dusty trees. 'In a short time all this will be different... For those days... nothing is too much. Come on, forward!' she ordered herself. 'A day will come when the look in people's eyes will be different and children will grow up freely in this light...' How Gavril wished to have a child, how she cried in jail

when she had her miscarriage, after having been beaten...

All this will be requitted with eternal hatred... Then something died within her and something else was born. At first Gavril was afraid: "Where's the Iuli of erstwhile?" he had asked inquisitively and a little anxious. She did not answer, but he had to understand.

How short a time they had been together! Not two years in all those ten. He was arrested just when she was freed.

Now she was in the street. Under her black shawl her hair was wet as if soaked. No passers-by... Holtzmann had found the right house... Slowly, lifting up her hand at times, she shaded her eyes with her palm: in the distance, or was it only her imagination that they were so far away, the chimneys of the factory were smoking. "You won't take it away! You're not numerous enough!... We are..."

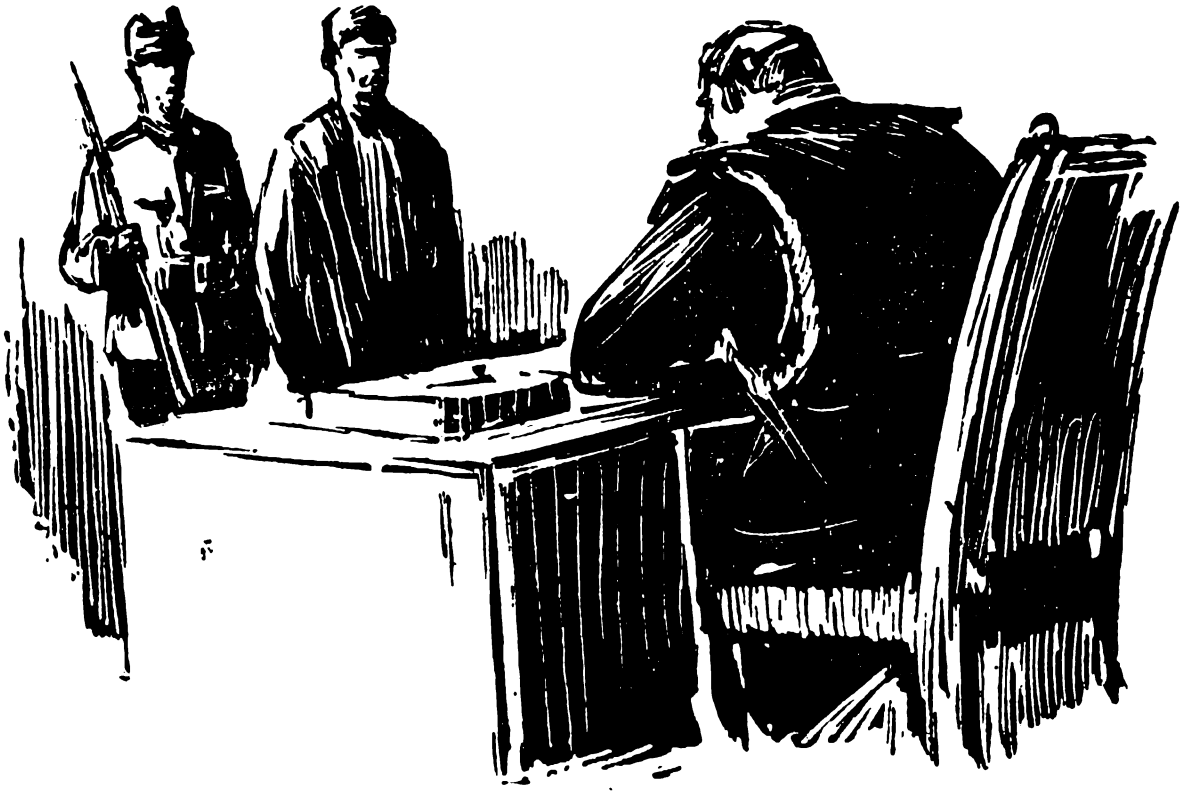
Now, the street turned. The dulled but powerful din of the town greeted her... 'Come on, another step and yet another... And Gavril too... when retreating... had laboured as hard, if not harder. They were the winners, and still had to march on.' She gazed in front of her, in surprise. She could no longer see the street, as if there were a fog. When she was a child she used to run about on the fresh grass, after the geese. Was her childhood so near?... Yes, life has a meaning. She could indeed say so, now. Once, when Jurca would be old and say to the Young Pioneers: "The Party has given life a meaning," they would look at him in surprise: "How was it when life had no meaning?"

Now she did not know where she was walking... The small flame of pain began to flicker, then grew hrotter but she counted : "Another step... come on! Foward!, Yet another..." And indeed she was not walkingal one: next to her there was Jurca's strong, kind shoulder... 'How well he had fulfilled his tasks!... and Uncle Mihai, who, twisting his moustache, was angry with the class enemy... And Holtzmann...what kind eyes this boy has...'

And quite alone Iulia walked in the midst of a great crowd. The wind was up, making Gavril's red hair flutter, his white teeth glittering in the middle of his swarthy face;

he motioned now with his small, dry hand which could caress so tenderly... and gave the answer to so many questions... The pain piercing through her like gimlet gripped her whole body; only her heart kept beating... still... beating... 'Come on. forward....' The ground covered with dust moved up nearer and nearer and the pain and the light went out, one afther the othcr...

Those who picked up from the dust the body of the dead woman nerer knew who she was. She was buried the same day, in the evening, at the border of the "Eternity" cemetery, in the blue shadow of the tall brick wall, on the northern side.



CHAPTER XI

The prisoners were shown into the military jail, crammed in together with deserters, men who had mutilated themselves and others who feigned madness to escape being sent to the front. They had been arrested the evening of the day when there had been the scuffle at the station, but there was such a great confusion, that they were kept for hours in the prison courtyard, in the lorries that had brought them. Soldiers with fixed bayonets gazed at them in surprise and somehow afraid.

In the evening they were pushed into a sort of underground vault. The prison built during Maria Theresia's reign, was very old and damp, a sheet of foul water running continually down the walls. No other noise reached this place. When the heavy door closed with a rattle of chains, old Jurca gathered them all around him.

"Now, lads, how lucky, we've all been brought together. This proves how stupid fascists can be, but so much the better. Listen to me: we heard that in the station there was a train with boys and we went to get them out as they were dying of thirst and want of air... Nothing else!... Get me?"

"Yes," said Marcu, the tall stoker, in a low voice. "Damn them all, why didn't they arrest us at home, so that our women might know where we are?"

"I was caught when leaving the engine-shed," said Horváth.

"Whoever babbled?"

"Why, Mr. Orban, of course... damn him!

"Hush," ordered Jurca. "Stop all that. We'll find out some day. Now the point is... not one word more. If they ask how many we were, say just those that are here."

"You may rely on us, we're not children... It's rather cold," the stoker said making a wry face. "That 's how it is low down underground."

"Have you ever been in jail before?" asked Jurca.

"Of course I have. Three times."

"Hush," whispered Horváth who was listening at the door.

From the passage came the tramping of hobnailed top-boots; a voice bellowed:

"That was foolish! Sabotage! Fancy, putting them all together!"

"But, sir!"

"Shut up! You'll have to answer for this."

"Get them out at once."

"Corporal on guard! Corporal on guard! Are you asleep?"

"No, sir!"

"Take a group of men!"

"Very good, sir!"

"Where have we empty cells?"

"Nowhere, sir!"

"You must have!" yelled Benea.

"Take them to your police cells..."

"I haven't any. Besides, it's a military offence!"

"Then don't roar at us!"

"Captain! Have you taken leave of your wits?"

"Corporal on guard! Where the hell are you? Are you asleep?"

Jurca started shaking hands with his companions. He shook them hard to give them strength. The door opened with a plaintive creaking sound.

"Get out! Single file!"

Horváth was the first to go out, then the stoker, old Jurca and the others following. In the stone passage lit by a paltry electric bulb they saw a lot of police officers and plain clothes men of the Secret Police ready to pounce on them.

"This way!" the corporal ordered, holding his gun ready to shoot.

"Look sharper!" a gendarmerie officer said fussily. "Look sharper!"

They were separated and locked up in various offices. At every door stood a soldier with fixed bayonet.

Mihai Jurca stretched himself till his bones cracked; then he cast a glance at the peeling walls (it was the office of the quarter-masters) and wanted to lie down on a bench.

"It's forbidden!" snapped the soldier. He was a young lad wearing a tall pointed cap, pulled down over his eyebrows.

"Why, you son of a gun? Jurca said scoldingly. "Don't you see I'm old?"

"Orders is orders!"

"All right, all right, then!"

He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. 'Now our comrades have certainly heard. They can't complain... we could not do otherwise... And then, it was a regular anti-fascist demonstration...' If only the young lad he had taken to his home would find the money in the cupboard and get himself some food. When he brought him home to give him a bed as he was dead tired, the boy fell asleep at once. And the gang will go on working as though nothing had happened. Szilágyi will manage very well without him. As for the *liaison* it will certainly be established in a few days.

He heard a door open and pricked his ears.

"Mihai Jurca."

"Yes."

The soldier clicked the gun-lock and motioned to him to go ahead.

"Be careful, uncle, don't... or I'll shoot."

"Are you frightened?" asked the old man, and the soldier, surprised, made a movement as if he wanted to butt him.

"Move on, get on..."

They walked along a passage on the first floor, then entered a small room. The soldier stopped not knowing what to do, balancing his long French bayonet all the time. A door opened and a man with a red moustache motioned to Jurca to come in. The old man straightened his shoulders. 'Oh, how many like you have I faced before—he boasted to himself — more than the hairs on my head.' He went in.

At one desk sat Benea, in his black uniform. His very fair eyebrows kept moving, giving him a surprised expression. He asked Jurca to come nearer, scrutinized him closely, then asked, all of a sudden:

"How long is it since you last saw your blackguard of a son?

('Well, well, is that how he's beginning? It's going to be no joke!')

"Almost three years," he answered calmly.

"It's a lie."

Mihai shook his head, put his finger to his cheek and smiled.

"D'you know what he is up to?"

"How could I, if I haven't seen him?..."

Benea cast down his eyes. Three or four years ago he would have been dying to get everything out of such a prey; he would have gone about it, according to all the rules, talking about all sort of unimportant things, then unexpectedly throwing in some question which seemed harmless: then if that method failed, he knew what he had to do. But now... The B. B. C. had just spoken of the impending fall of Paris. At Jassy the front had almost been broken through; who knows what the morrow might bring? He screamed, turning red:

"Stop joking, man, or I'll smash your jaws. Where's your son?"

Jurca said nothing, then, realizing he would have to say something, he repeated:

"As I said before, I haven't the slightest idea."

He turned and looked through the window. It was a clear, cloudless night by now. He longed to see his son: where could he be and what was he doing? He must by now have heard of his arrest and was worrying...

A heavy blow struck him between the eyes. The old man saw red but did not move.

"Speak up! Speak up!" repeated with every blow the man with the red moustache who had motioned to him to come in.

Benea had risen and, with his hands behind his back was looking out of the window. 'There you are, even Carol is striking without gusto', he thought. 'Funny, how people feel everything is going to the dogs... And the row at the station... Oh, if I could only run away somewhere...' He heard the blows fall and Carol's stertorous panting.

"Stop!" he said, and turned to Jurca. Then he was struck, harder than by a blow, by the sharp, clear look in Jurca's grey eyes. 'What 'll I do if in a month or two these same eyes still look at me... as clearly, but...'

"Stop, Carol! Get out!"

Without showing any surprise, the man rolled down his shirt sleeves, put his coat on his shoulders and slunk out noiselessly.

"Sit down," said Benea pleasantly, pushing a chair for him with his foot.

Jurca sat down. A thin stream of blood was running from his nose, turning his silvery moustache red.

"Why wont you be wise?"

"I've got nothing to say," answered the old man dully. 'Control yourself — he said to himself — and no big words. Those will be said at the right time.'

Benea sat down in front of him and stretched out his legs.

"You're an old worker... Why won't you tell us?"

'What has this got to do with it all?' wondered the old man. Then he understood: 'You've lost your heads,

you crows, you've lost it as you did in 1921... You'll learn some day what it is to strike a worker. To hell with you!'

"When did you meet him last?"

"I've already told you, three years ago. To this..." (Jurca was going to say: 'I won't answer again,' but he refrained. 'That's how young people do when they stand before a man of the Secret Police: they start pouring forth, as though they were reciting a history lesson... Hang big words! Silence is good enough for him. Benea would not understand anyhow. God what fools the bourgeois are!'

"Look here. The trouble you caused in the station alone is sufficient to court-martial you. It's war time, no one will think of your grey hair. Come on, don't you know where your son is hiding?"

'The man's stark mad!... How can he think I'll tell him where my son is? Does he not understand that if I were only a father, and...' He could not help it. He smiled and felt this would begin to enrage the other.

"You know and refuse to tell..."

"I don't know."

Benea cracked his fingers.

"Carol!" he called. "Carol!"

The man with the maize-coloured moustache came in, and, thinking he knew his chief's intentions, began to take his coat off.

"No, there's no need for that," said Benea, tired. "Take him back. Get the others in, one after the other."

In the passage Jurca met Horváth and winked at him. He saw a small flame dancing in his eyes which he knew quite well: 'Don't worry, not a word... It will pass too..'

He went into the small room and producing his handkerchief began wiping the blood off his face.

"Why, they've beaten you?" said the soldier compassionately.

Jurca folded up his handkerchief, produced a package of cigarettes, and asked him:

"Where do you come from, my lad?"

"Eh," sighed the soldier, "from Bacău. I haven't been home for so long..."

'We all have our troubles,' thought the old man.

Although the cross-examination lasted till dawn, Benea only found out — as in fact he had expected — that the men had not been able to stand it any longer when hearing that a train with Rumanian youngsters was in the station and the poor souls were starving and thirsty. He instituted proceedings against them for "rebellion"; after the inquest they would be sent to Timişoara where they would be sentenced to death and executed.

*

The newspaper "Tribuna Romînă" was going from bad to worse. Vîslan no longer took any interest in it; he sat locked up in his office, from morning till night, drinking heavily. So all the work was left on Şendrea's shoulders. The military *communiqués* were so meagre that one could hardly fill up half a column with them. The leaders were cribbed from the "Curentul" (The Current) and summarized, but as the Bucharest papers arrived very late their articles made no sense being contradicted by the *communiqués*. On the day when Rommel's brilliant strategy in Normandy was commented upon at large, the *communiqué* announced the Field Marshal's heroic death. And all this hardly made up one page. Şendrea who felt somehow responsible and was very troubled by the eventual consequences, knocked for hours on end at Vîslan's door — but the latter answered hiccoughing:

"Leave me alone, my dear fellow... I'm thinking."

"Not even one page, Mr. Vîslan..."

"Put in advertisements: the flood is coming. Announce it!"

When the paper failed to appear one day, Vîslan brightened up a bit. He came into the large office and said, biting at his beard which had grown very untidy:

"Pals, this cannot go on... It can not, Miţi, my angel ...Oh, the bigwigs will run to Switzerland, Sweden and the Argentine, but what about me? I haven't a farthing, upon my word... not a farthing for a drink. You are the last apostles following me... in fact, why do you? Oh, I understand. You've no other place to meet, and you... here. It doesn't matter, I don't mind. Youth demands its rights. If you wish I'll give you the key of my

flat. The bed's good, it does not creak. I anyhow can't sleep."

"Mr. Vîslan," said Miţi rising to her feet and trying to cheer him up. "Please do not talk like that, you'll break my heart. Why are you so sad? Everything will turn out all right..."

"Şendrea! Bow down to the ground! Salute the sacred common sense of woman! You're a saint, Miţi dear. A saint. What can I do? No one wants to write one line more... I get no advertisements either. Who would think of asking now for a lost bicycle or for a 'Pekinese answering to the name of Bibo?' Who?"

"Mr. Vîslan," said Şendrea stubbornly, "we must find something..."

"Yes, but what? Say, what? Don't you see? Suslănescu never comes here any more. Robber the filthy Jew, has vanished in the bowels of the earth. I can't find an idea, the Russians are breaking through the front, secret weapons are no longer being invented... I'm broke, I cannot pay you... I haven't any money. I'll sell my books, my clothes and reward you, my dear friends."

He began to sob, kissing poor Miţi's thin hands perfumed with Coty; she was terribly upset.

They nevertheless found a way out; they changed the paper into a sort of literary magazine. They asked Tiberius Demian, a clerk of the Greek-Catholic consistory and the town's well-known bard, to sent them poetry to pluck up their hearts. He brought them a lengthy poem proving that in critical moments all the heroes rise from their tombs and fight. The mountaineers especially are matchless.

You surely know our peasant free
Who goes on fighting, full of glee.
He is the same old mountaineer
Who never has known what is fear.
But if you think he has been slain,
Far from it: he will rise again!
But whom he does kill in a fight
Is dead for ev'r and ever;
Whom he will strike with all his might,
Will never rise up, never!

Rummaging through his untouched mail, they found another small poem by Suciu, a school-boy. He threatened the Hungarians that they would be butchered, every one of them, women and children included:

You who've treated our Transylvanian brothers just
like slaves,
Shall not escape our vengeance dire, not even in your
graves!

At the foot of the literary page Vîslan had inserted, after perspiring profusely, the following commentary:

"Every Rumanian is a born poet. This is a great truth. He never abandons the sublime weapon which upholds him in his hour of grief. Our so sorely tried district proves through its distinguished writers that:

D*on't think we ever shall permit*
O*ur being enslaved; the holy tradition of our forbears,*
W*e'll not give up! The fire flaming here for centuries,*
N*e'er shall die out, yes, we swear it.*
H*ow splendid is our old and noble culture!*
I'*m telling you, we shall arise again from our ashes*
Phoenix-wise ;
T*ime, the almighty judge, is surely on our side*
L*inks most holy are binding us to our past*
E*rstwhile so glorious ; our heroes did not die in vain :*
R*umanian hearts beat faster, recalling their brave*
deeds!

Ion Vîslan

"Mr. Vîslan, sir — the rather embarrassed Şendrea stammered — your foot-note doesn't seem, excuse my saying so, to make much sense!"

"Let it appear as it is ! Not another word ! I'm no fool, Şendrea. Try and read the lines in acro... acropolis!"

*

Varga had the feeling he was living in a hotel. The arm-chairs covered by their antimacassars, the windows covered with black paper inside, the carpets rolled up in

corners, gave him an unpleasant feeling. On parting with his family at the station, he had been very moved, almost ready to shed tears; then when the train had vanished in the distance, he returned home breathing relieved: it was his first spell of bachelorhood after twenty-seven years. Larisse had left too and so had the servant. Sofia had asked a doddering, fussy old aunt called Matilda to come and live in the house to look after him. Varga had smiled. This sort of espionage was very naïve, but annoying all the same. The first evening Aunt Matilda had come to him and said shyly, her lips trembling with excitement:

"My dear Salvator... if you want to... you see... I don't want to hinder you in any way... I'm as discreet as the tomb in which I shall soon be. A man alone... I quite understand." She blinked meaningly: "I shall never blame you, whatever you do; I'm so grateful to you for having brought me here with you..."

"I don't see what you mean, auntie," Varga had said indignantly.

He went about his work just as he used to do and had the satisfaction of discovering that he had not been mistaken about Horoviţă; he was indeed a low-down swindler and the business with the contractor — there was no doubt about it — was nothing but a piece of swindling. Varga pointed out to him plainly that he understood everything, but that, as he was used to such sort of business, he would arrange things so that the entreprise and its manager would go scot-free. Horoviţă was grateful, and as he liked to look respectable, although he was a rather clumsy Tartuffe, he raised Varga's share of the profits and placed his own car at his disposal.

In the evening, before going to bed, Varga locked himself up in the library and crouched by the wireless, his head and the set covered with a blanket. The news was disastrous. In Paris an insurrection had broken out, the Americans were expected any time, the Russians were advancing rapidly in Poland. After listening to all the broadcasts, he sat down at a table and made his plans. He put down his ideas in code, changing every letter for a figure, then hid the papers away in the covers of a book of fairy-

tales, where, decidedly, no one would think of looking for them. By dint of thinking of the times that were to come he forgot his interview with Benea, and the terror it had aroused in him. He was enjoying perfect peace, as in bygone days, when even canvassing and its endless scheming, speechifying and bustle had the charm of action, and when even to run a risk was as pleasant as a game of cards when you have money enough to play for the sake of the game only. The baron's words had left no room for ambiguity: they intended him to be the leader.

The fourth day after his family's departure, Motzeanu called on him. His face was distorted by fear and he seemed at bay. In broken words he told him that for two days a man had been standing in front of his house and when he walked in the streets he felt he was being shadowed.

"The baron's a swine, believe me. A swine. He isn't to be found anywhere. He isn't at the hospital. I was there too. He must have fled to Zerind and left us all here, in the lurch, a prey to the police. The last time I spoke to him..."

Motzeanu stopped all of sudden.

"What did he say to you?"

"Oh, it's of no consequence. Believe me, don't trust him. He's an old fox. He promises wonders and then he keeps the best of everything for himself.

"What?" Varga cried, shaking him by the shoulder, as he was seized by a terrible suspicion.

"Quite so!"

"Speak plainly, please!"

"Look here," Motzeanu said making up his mind. "The baron promised me everything. He said I alone was capable of taking the real leadership of the party in these moments."

"It can't be true!"

The other looked at him spitefully, as though he had scored a success.

"And, pray, why not? The truth, alas, is that those are mere words. The fact is I don't feel like playing the martyr. If anything happens, whom will they arrest? Me, of course... Have you heard that a lot of people have been arrested at the station and at the factory? And yes-

terday the German dismantling gang arrived: soldiers, S.S.men, all of them. Salvator, God only knows what is in store for us..."

But Varga was not listening to him. He had sunk into an arm-chair, his fingers to his forehead, as though sitting for a photographer; and something was revolving more and more swiftly in his brain. He suddenly was aware what a credulous fool, how ridiculous he had been, and so he went for Motzeanu in a rage:

"And you believed him! You, who, excuse my saying so, you, who had a rather strange attitude..."

"What attitude?" snapped Motzeanu ready to pick a quarrel with him. "Pray, why was yours any better?"

"Mine was more honest, at any rate."

Take care what you're saying!"

"I won't!" Varga began to shout, "I've had enough of it. What do you take me for? Think I am a puppet whose strings you can pull as you want? You've always pushed me on from behind, you and your coterie. But now it's all up. My honesty and credulity have a limit. I'm not going to sacrifice my life and position just to go on playing a super..."

"What's come over you?"

"Nothing! D'you hear? Nothing. I'm fed up. Risking... risking always!"

Motzeanu straightened himself with dignity.

"Is that... envy speaking?" he asked theatrically.

"Envy? No, sir, disgust! Disgust! Let me tell you I was proposed the same thing, and I was made the same promises. Yes, sir! You needn't frown! We've had enough Jesuitism. If this goes on, the party has signed its sentence of egress from history. A disgraceful egress, Motzeanu!" He was choking with rage: "And I... I... let me tell you: I'd rather be with the communists than with you. Yes, I would."

"Salvator!"

"Yes, I'm fed up... How long is a mummy, a fossil to pull the strings? How long, I wonder?"

"So, now it's you who want to pull them, eh? " Motzeanu said sneeringly, unable to control himself any longer.

Varga however was beside himself, so he started roaring.

"Out! Get out, sir! I shall show you what stuff I'm made of!"

"You'll be very sorry, Mr. Varga!" stammered Motzeanu, whom Varga was pushing out from behind. "I shall show you."

"How dare you threaten me in my own house?

From the doorway Motzeanu was menacing him with his closed fist.

"You were saying you wanted to join the communists, 'Comrade' Varga, weren't you? Well, you'll see!" And he slammed the door as hard as he could.

Varga stood in the middle of the library, dazed. The door opened noiselessly and Aunt Matilda put in her grey head.

"What's happened, Salvator? Who was that gentleman?"

"Leave me alone!" shrieked Varga advancing a step towards her as though he meant to strike her. Half-dead with fear, the old woman closed the door and ran upstairs, where she started packing her luggage.

"What a blunder I've made," repeated Varga disconsolately. He remembered that Benea was perfectly well informed about all their conversations. Now, he was sure that he got all his information from Motzeanu. He began to moan softly. He thought he had a fever. He rushed to the window and pulled up the blind with a jerk. A tall man was pacing the pavement in front of the house. Motzeanu must have gone straight to Benea, and he might be arrested that very night. The man on the pavement looked up and gazed at the building where no lights were showing. Varga withdrew from the window, tripped on a carpet and fell headlong on his back. The sharp pain at the back of his neck awakened him. "I must leave! I must leave at once! I have no longer the right to stay in this house." He ran to the bedroom and, unlocking the chothes wardrobe, started throwing over his shoulder whatever he laid his hands on: ties, shirts, gloves, a pair of pyjamas, a suit of clothes. He crammed them pell-mell into a pig-skin travelling bag. then, throwing off his dressing gown, put on a dark blue suit,

He had read in a detective story that in the dark it is advisable to wear dark coloured clothes. He looked for his shoes. Where should he go? He stopped to think, still on all fours on the carpet, panting. 'Yes, of course to Lola's... He'd spend the night there, he'd tell her all the perils in store for him, and she — she was so maternal — she would protect him and fondle him until, dead tired and exhausted, he would fall asleep like a baby after its bath.' He left a note on the table: "I'm away. Don't worry." When he went out of the courtyard, he stopped to listen. Everything was quiet. A few bats flew past him drunk with speed, waving their sticky wings. Avoiding the front gate, he stole out through the garden and, when in the street, took to his heels, after ascertaining there was no one following him. 'Now, I've joined the resistance,' he said to himself. The Lola idea had been splendid. If only he would find her alone.

*

Varga awoke wet with perspiration. A ruddy-whitish ray peeping through the cotton blind had stopped glued as it were to his face. He heard somebody's healthy breathing and could not realize where he was until, reaching out his hand with eyes still closed, he came across a soft plump shoulder. The remembrance of the night of passion and of his fear flowed into him in an instant like water into sand. Lola, with mouth and chin smeared with lipstick, stretched herself sleepily.

"Darling! Are we getting up so early? Oh, how wonderful, it's been!..."

Varga got out of bed and sat down on a chair. And now, what next? The night had passed and there would be twelve hours, such a terrible long time, till the next night. How was he going to fill them? Should he go to his work or stay here, in this attic which in the daytime was sure to be as hot as an oven? Whither should he go? 'Oh, Lord, where shall I go?' He was tired out and felt as if he had compressed air instead of marrow in his bones, so light did they seem. The smell of perfume gave him a shooting headache. Lola was lolling in bed, opening and closing her large eyes and wriggling her toes lazily.

Her silk chemise had gathered up at her breast and she was moving her hips, trying to pull it down. Varga began to dress. Lola had no bathroom, and at the thought only that he would have to wash in a basin he nearly felt sick.

"Where are you going, darling?"

"I'm off, Lola. I'll be back tonight."

"All right."

'She does not even try to detain me. Everything's the same to her. What a perfectly happy creature! What a filthy female!'

"Ta-ta!" he said pursing his lips.

The morning was sultry. The trees along the pavement hung their branches like rain-drenched, sluggish wings. Here and there, a window sparkled dazzlingly in the sunshine. 'But if I am arrested in the street? This strain is really too much.' He entered an empty dairy and ordered some coffee and a roll. He did not notice when they were brought to him, but, when he wanted to drink the coffee, he noticed two dead flies floating in the brown liquid. The rolls were sticky. 'My God, what more will happen to us? Where shall we flee? What idols shall we worship?'

He rose to go.

"The bill, sir!" said the owner in a panic, coming towards him hurriedly.

"What bill? Don't you see I haven't touched anything?" snapped Varga.

"But I served you."

"With those loathsome slops? And there are flies in the coffee."

"There weren't when..."

"You mean to say I put them in?"

"I didn't..."

"How dare you argue with me. Do you know who I am?" cried Varga enraged.

But the dairyman, a fat man, wrapped in a white apron, was not frightened. He went to the door, opened it and looked out for a policeman.

"I won't have any of this. You ordered the food, so you've got to pay it — or I'll call the police."

Varga relented for he mopped his forehead and smiled dolefully:

"All right... all right..." He produced a thousand lei note and placed it on the counter. "Change it."

With offensive minuteness, the dairyman examined the banknote against the light to see if it was not forged, then gave him the change.

"Got money and refuses to pay!" he complained to his empty shop.

Varga walked away aimlessly. His heart ached when he remembered the baron's foul play, and the silly words he had said to Motzeanu. He was the traitor, no doubt about it. Although his son had been a notorious legionary, he had not suffered because of his politics. Was that how they rewarded him after so many years of sacrifice? Well, no matter, no matter! If that was how things stood, well...

He dashed into a tobacconist's and bought two sheets of white paper, then went into a miserable pub and, sitting down at a table at the far end of the room, began to write.

The same day Benea spread out some papers on his desk. 'What pigs men are,' he commented. 'Dirty swine. I'll be damned if that isn't philosophy!' He began to read them over again.

Sir,

In the present critical hours, my duty as a Rumanian, prevents me from being silent any longer.

When the imperious summons of the times demand it of us, we must place the supreme welfare of our country above all our petty daily interests. I must first and foremost declare that the charges brought against me are absolutely false and wholly inconsistent with the most elementary truth. Throughout my activity, I have followed now as well as in the past, nothing but superior commandments — even when they ran counter to my personal interests. I am anxious to inform you that your suspicions were well founded. Certain treacherous individuals amidst our leadership have indeed had talks with the outlawed. It is a positive fact which I can prove at any time. The various combinations made by those gentlemen, no matter under what disguise, are nothing, in fact, but an attempt to save their skins, and to push inno-

cent persons into their places, people prompted by the best intentions. But those persons cannot be mystified, for ever. Spiritual blackmail has no effect upon them. I wish to state that I had nothing to do *with the dangerous, onerous negotiations carried on by irresponsible or* senile *persons against the lawful order, and that any attempt of theirs to compromise me is based on slander and lies.*

Yours respectfully,
Dr. Salvator Varga

The second statement was worded as follows:

Sir,

Following our talk during which I could not find the right words to express my gratitude for the truly occidental considerateness and delicacy with which you had the tact of pointing out to me that—I take the liberty of reproducing your own words — 'good intentions employed by criminals may become harmful' — a statement which, after serious meditation and in view of the gravity of the present moment, I adopt entirely, I have succeeded in seeing in a different light the manoeuvres of certain persons for whom I had hitherto nourished too much respect.

Thus, lawyer Varga whose masonic relations are, I hope, well known to you, said to me cynically: 'As soon as it is possible, I shall join the Bolshevik party' (sic). After trying to make me adhere to his ideas with a view to incite me, I no longer have the right to doubt that it is my duty to acquaint you with this fact, in order that I may contribute as much as stands in my power to the purification demanded by the gravity of the present hour.

Yours sincerely,
Dr. Emil P. D. Motzeanu

The third paper was briefer:

19. *VIII. D.R.P. of Z. proposed to Mr. S.V. to accept the leaderhip of the local branch of the N.P.P. in view of future action.*

He proposed the same thing to Mr.E.P.D.M. who accepted. Nothing concrete has been established as yet, as they are waiting for an aggravation of the military situation at the front, before starting a campaign.

Father I.P. refused the role as being incompatible with his cloth. He declared he was in favour of beginning an action. It seems R.P. of Z. contacted a representative of the communists but no concrete result was reached. Father I.P. disapproved of those negotiations. D.R.P. is keeping his room under pretence of ill health.

"Youngster"

Benea took the papers and locked them away in a built-in safe. He was highly content. 'Fancy, they're starting becking and bowing to me, the chief of the police, to whom formerly they wouldn't have condescended to say good-day. If necessary, they'd lick the soles of my feet too.'

He waved his hand and started reading his mail. From Timișoara they let him know that on account of the great number of cases come up for high treason — in spite of summary proceedings — the rebels in his town would not be tried before the beginning or middle of September and that they would have to be kept at the headquarters of the Secret Police to try and obtain from them further information. 'A pretty kettle of fish everywhere,' thought Benea grimacing with disgust. He collected the files he had to take to Fritsch. For a moment he was about to add the papers received that day; then he realized it would have been unwise of him to do so. If what Agent 12 said had an atom of truth in it, the communist organization would be caught in a day or two. He wished it with all his heart. The Germans would be grateful and would certainly secure for him a small place in Switzerland. He dreamt of a neat little house with only two rooms, somewhere on the shores of the Leman Lake. He would grow a Siementhal cow, two Yorkshire piggies and write his memoirs; 'Just dreams,' and he was annoyed at their flimsiness, 'childish dreams.'

Salvator Varga had a boundless faith in fate; so far, all his actions and their consequences had succeeded each other in perfect symmetrical order, the same as when counting, one comes after two. He had been given a sound practical education. As a child his mother had acquainted him with what went on behind the scenes of family life, but had not bestowed upon him as a child moral support and a stimulant, with motherly tenderness but rather with the stubbornness of a pedagogue rigidly pursuing an educational method. That is why Varga had been spared the romantic crises of youth. He had calmly married a woman who, even at the time, had not attracted him sexually. He had soon been unfaithful to her, careful that his escapades should not impair the unity of his family, and especially its prosperity. His conceptions of the world boiled down to a "code of common sense" of faultless mediocrity, which he observed rigorously, but in whose permanency he did not believe. That is why he realized that he had lost control over his two children. At fifteen, Lucian had become too speculative and had proved to be intellectually his superior. Varga had thus been unable to hand down his robust mentality, since there was no love lost between them, and the boy had become impossible to understand. Teddie had inherited some of his uncle George's incorrigible bohemianism, and as the whole family admired the latter, looking upon him as a real *grand seigneur*, Varga had been unable to dam either the snobbishness, or the "smart" rottenness of his younger son. On the few occasions when he had brooded over some of those facts, he had soon succeeded in soothing himself: the children had a sound position and the life they would step into — on the thick carpet laid down for them by their father's toil —would see to it to ensure both of them normal, natural feelings.

All that had now collapsed in the span of a few days; it was the first time that Varga realized that he could be arrested, beaten up, have his face slapped, be spat at and maybe even killed. This discovery was terrible. There was no help, no hope, no matter how absurd, that could assuage him. When he had personally taken his note to Benea, he quieted down for a short time, until the moment

when he started reckoning, and then he said to himself that his move had been rash, thoughtless, unnecessary, hence a crime. The present situation might last for a few months, at the most. But during this time would they not have ample time to hang him, to torture him a thousand times ? The two nights he had spent at Lola's had turned him into a squeezed orange; he was not young enough to afford such excesses and the woman was stupid enough to think he wanted only to take advantage of his wife's absence to have the time of his life. He found a way out just when he did not know what to do next; he made up his mind to send his job and the "Indagrara" lawsuits to the devil and leave for Moneasa. He met father Potra in the street and from the first glance the latter guessed something was wrong and asked him to come and live at his place. His house was not watched, and as it was situated in a quarter that was almost always deserted, one could easily notice the smallest incident that seemed suspicious. Moreover his house had four issues. Varga was extremely happy. When he got to Father Potra's, however, he found Suslănescu there, in a very alarming state, pale and with a growth of several days beard.

"I forgot to tell you — said Potra with his gentle smile — that I had another patient, professor Suslănescu. He, too, is in a similar position."

As a matter of fact, Suslănescu had run away from Velceanu's house. Mimi had become unbearable. She had real fits of hysteria every day; she threatened to kill herself or to make confessions, screaming that this sort of purposeless life had become unbearable. And when Suslănescu, impressed and moved by her reproaches, started pacing the room like a madman, wringing his hands, she would rush at him and putting her arms round his neck, her wet cheek against his own which felt like a short haired brush, she begged him to forgive her, to understand her and not to despise her. During this panting litany, she would slip her hand under his shirt and scratch his skin with her finger-nails. Suslănescu had wanted to confess to Father Potra, but not having the strength to do so, had begged him mysteriously to put him up for a few days.

In the small space of the oblong room, the three men could hardly move, so they had to loll on the sofa almost all the time. In the evening, without minding their presence, Potra would kneel in front of his small altar and pray, quiet and concentrated. They hardly breathed for fear of disturbing him, and Suslănescu could not help thinking this was not a very delicate way of behaving. The silence and maybe their unwillingness to go out, soon gave them the mentality of conspirators; the real proportions of the threat hanging over them had been lost. (Suslănescu played the part he had taken for himself perfectly well). They never left the house and had started cooking in the room, on a small kerosene stove, that was out of order and gave out waves of loathsome smoke.

Father Potra had no regular work to do: he was the confessor of the Greek-Catholic seminary and the boys were on holiday. In the morning, he went to the market, brought home vegetables, eggs, fowls, bread and wine and then the three of them standing in one another's way, would start cooking. The meal was ready about five, when, exhausted after such long waiting, they were no longer hungry, but ate heartily with loud exclamations of admiration for their talent. After the meal, they slept for a while and got up about eight, dizzy with the close smell of the room. They listened to the news, their ears close to the pink cloth of the radio set, breathless at the thought of the danger they were incurring. After that, they sat down as best they could and started commenting the news. The usual question was: what would happen "after that," and the position they thought they were in compelled them to discuss it with the utmost seriousness. Varga discovered that Suslănescu had conservative principles and extolled the big landed property.

"Yes, Dr. Varga, a sad historical mistake has been made. The moment when Rumania gave up what constituted her power, her historic role, and made room for foreign capital, we became the vassals of the industrial states, their milch cow... The part played by the boyars has been so often denied, that it has become trite to repeat such a thing. But please show me, at the present moment, one politician that could compare with Maiorescu, Marghi-

loman, P.P. Carp, Arion, or Take Ionescu who are so cried down... And tell me, please, whom did the post-war land reform make happy? The peasant? No, it did not. It destroyed a class that had not exhausted its reserves, a clever, learned class, with a tradition of its own... In twenty years the bourgeoisie brought the country to the situation which it is in today. A ball that everybody tosses about. Remember the international position we had at the beginning of the first world war and you will have to admit I am right. Other countries flirted with us and what was the result? Greater Rumania!"

"And what do you think we ought to do?" said Varga annoyed; he just hated historical discussions.

"I don't know," said Suslănescu evasively, "I don't know."

"So then?"

And they both turned towards Father Potra who was gazing at them placidly, with a faint superior smile. In fact, he too had nothing to say. He had returned from Italy full of enthusiasm for Mussolini's policy, although at the Vatican, in the circles where he had been educated, the *Duce* was hated because of his disrespect for the Holy See. According to Potra, Italy would become the greatest power in Europe, provided the Vatican be given the leading role. A Catholic and fascist state, Pope Pius and Mussolini — *civitas dei!*

Varga was too depressed after the recent ordeal he had gone through, to be able to look at the situation with composure. So, after two days spent there, he again began to wish for the shelter Lola could offer him — a haven of forgetfulness. Still he could not bring himself to leave. The third day before going to bed, Suslănescu said to Potra:

"Maybe... you will think my request rather unbecoming. ...Would you mind opening the Bible at random and reading us a passage?... I remember that in some chapter of the Bible, some people who were shipwrecked as we are now, did the same... I don't suppose it is forbidden by any..."

"No, no, it isn't..." said Potra gladly. He took a Bible from a shelf, lifted his eyes to the ceiling and passing

his fingers over the side of the book, opened it quickly, put his fingernail on the page and read: "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh when thou shalt say: I have no pleasure in them... Ecclesiasts chap. II ve. 1."

"Once more... once more," whispered Suslănescu in ecstasies. "Give me the book."

"Gladly," said Potra smiling kindly... Here you are, dear fellow."

Suslănescu opened it and read too:

"For the vendor shall not...

Varga started and sat up, leaning on his elbow.

"That's... that's real sorcery!" he said reproachfully.

The Bible is not meant for us to play with.

"Do you find it strange, Salvator, that no matter at what place you open it, it answers our anxieties like a trumpet of fire lifting the veil from the unrighteousness we have committed?"

"Those are strange words, Father," said Varga very angry. "What unrighteousness have I committed? Have I murdered? Have I stolen?"

"But what about the Christian education you have given your children? One of them is a soulless fornicator..."

"But Lucian?" put in Varga, deeply hurt.

"Worse, a thousand times worse. He is unable to see the difference between good and evil!" thundered the priest, no longer able to restrain himself. "You did not choose his friends; he is spiritually decayed."

Embarrassed by this too intimate argument, Suslănescu went to the bathroom to wash the dishes for supper and closed the door ostentatiously. The phone on the small table in the entrance hall buzzed several times. Suslănescu rushed to see who it was. He hoped, foolishly, it was Mimi, perhaps, but a thick manly voice answered him:

"Is that Father Potra?"

"No... no... I'll get him for you at once."

Potra came, picked up the receiver and listened. His face took on a deep expression of surprise and, despite all he did to control himself, Suslănescu realized he was extremely upset.

"Yes... yes... yes..." he said mechanically. "He's here, at my place."

"Yes... I'll let you know... What? Yes, I quite understand... Good bye."

He laid down the receiver and leaned against the wall, as if he felt dizzy.

"What's happened?" whispered Suslănescu sensing a bad omen.

"Nothing... come inside, please..."

Varga was just about to come out, in alarm. He had heard them talking.

"What is it?"

"General Belega, the prefect has telephoned," muttered Potra, regaining control of himself. His lips, hitherto pale, had become very red and were trembling a little.

"For God's sake — said Varga all in a fluster — speak up!"

"He told me that tomorrow evening at the prefecture there is a reception organized by the Rumanian-German Association. A German officer will give a talk on the present situation. We are *all* invited. He asked about you..."

"And? And what did you say?"

"I told him you were at my place," answered the priest, in a tone that admitted of no reply.

Varga did not dare say anything. He stood motionless; only his eyes, which had grown extraordinarily large, went from Potra to Suslănescu...

He added: "Your presence is *compulsory!* Otherwise... I decline all responsibility for the consequences!"

"What are we to do? What are we to do?" Varga started wailing, forgetting all his dignity. In his shirt-sleeves with his braces across his breast, unshaven and without a tie, he looked exceedingly common.

Father Potra sat down on a chair slowly and buried his forehead in his hands. 'He's praying,' thought Suslănescu, moved.

Varga could not stand still.

"What does it all mean? I can't make head or tail of it all. Could it be a trap? Let's talk it over! What are we to do? How should we act? What attitude should we adopt?"

"Collect yourself and take a seat!" ordered Potra who, in fact, was none too reassured himself.

Suslănescu felt more than ever that he did not fit in the picture. He did not dare ask: "Did he not mention me?" He would now be able to realize if he was of any importance. Did the prefect not mention his name? But how could he have known he was at Potra's? Maybe he had telephoned to his house. He would have to call at his house and ascertain and explain where he had been such a long time and tell a lot of lies. Mimi would find him out at once and there would be a scene, the same passionate reconciliation. When their blood calmed down everything would start anew. This wrechedness was a tragedy, but a filthy, humiliating tragedy. He wondered if the two guessed his anxiety. No, of course not; they envied his having been overlooked.

The silence was lasting too long, and was very oppressive. What could he have said to break it? Nothing... He could not find anything reasonable... He sighed. He knew now that he would go home, that his place was not among those worried, harrassed men. His suffering was of another kind, maybe of a more organic, but in any case, of a more serious kind.

"What are we to do?" sighed Varga.

"Here is what I suggest," said Potra. "Let's go to bed and try and not think of it. Maybe by morning..."

'The Holy Gost may appear to you,' said Suslănescu to himself humorously.

"You're right," assented Varga, and started taking off his trousers, which he just threw down at the foot of the sofa. They switched off the light at once. Lying uncomfortably on two arm-chairs on which his bed had been made, Suslănescu tried to breath regularly, so as to give the impression that he was sleeping. He succeeded, for after a while, Varga whispered:

"Father... Father..."

"What is it?"

"Shouldn't we... shouldn't we ring up the others... and see what they've decided?..."

"No... It'd mean we were uncertain, insincere. Let's sleep. Good night."

"'night," said Varga, in despair.

He lay for a long time with his eyes riveted on the small lamp burning under the holy images, whose bluish light kept flickering, casting an elongated shadow from left to right like a fosforescent pendulum. He started to count: One... two... three... and fell asleep.

Suslănescu had a strange dream: Mimi, naked, was riding a dinosaurus, emerging from a deep, greenish slough. He awoke: 'Will she be there too?'

In the morning, Father Potra said:

"My dear fellow, I have thought it over..."

"And?"

"We've got to go. Jesus never taught us to be cowards and He Himself never turned his back on danger... Go home, dress, and in the evening we shall all meet... there... Let's pray God to strengthen us."

Looking upon his last words as upon an injunction, he fell on his knees and clasped his hands. Varga knelt by him and Suslănescu feeling unhappy was wondering: 'What about me? What am I to do?' Unable to find an answer, he crossed himself several times, hastily. The gesture seemed to him odiously hypocritical.

CHAPTER XII

The building of the prefecture, wrapped in darkness, stood out against the dark blue sky like a mass of black shadow. As soon as a car would drive up to the gate, two soldiers would walk up to the chauffeur and order him to leave immediately. From eight o'clock a bustle had begun: cars, carriages and people arriving modestly on foot. General Belega had stationed a row of soldiers from the entrance, across the huge inner courtyard, as far as the shelter in the basement which had been changed into a reception hall. He did not want to be interrupted by some nocturnal air-raid alarm, so he had given up the idea of using the huge ground-floor hall which would have been better suited for the occasion. The guests went down a very steep winding staircase, lit up by scores of electric bulbs of all sizes and voltage. Then they walked along

a sort of corridor filled with cases which had been covered with Oltenian rugs borrowed from everywhere. The prefecture shelter was an up-to-date affair; it was very clean and looked like a Parisian tavern or like the cellar of a big vineyard. Big, heavy and rather clumsy arcades supported the ceiling; the far end of the wall was lined with racks for tools, spades, pick-axes and fire extinguishers. A sort of curtain had been hung to conceal all those necessary implements. With the help of the whole staff of officials and half a company of soldiers whom general Grinţeş had placed at his disposal, the prefect had worked wonders. Paper lanterns hung in studied symmetry, coiling strips of coloured paper waved lightly overhead; in a corner, on a platform hidden by Dărnescu's famous exotic plants was the Bubby Jazz-band, the best in the town. The buffet was sumptuous and around it were rows of arm-chairs. By order of the prefect, the handsomest officers in the garrison had been mobilized and each of them had been given personal instructions how to behave with the ladies. One thing only he had overlooked: the size and arrangement of the room forbade triumphal entrances or even entrances in groups. The guests were obliged to steal in one by one as though through a back door and it took such a time to collect a group, no matter how small, that the general was indeed very embarrassed. The first to arrive had been the officials of the prefecture (the few privileged), then the teachers of the secondary school, amongst whom Father Crăioc the arch-deacon, clad in a wide purplish cassock; his red, watered-silk waistband, as lustrous as a peacock's tail-feathers, was wound over the circumference of his belly. The prefect stood near the entrance, his wife by his side. For this festive occasion which delighted her, as it called up the good old times, she had wanted to wear her green ball-dress, but when she had brought it out of the trunk she noticed it was moth-eaten and went into hysterics. She had finally found a really impressive solution: she had come dressed as a nurse, her white cap tied under her chin, a very becoming way, for it hid the irreparable wrinkles of her throat. Her very high-heeled shoes alone were not in keeping with her sober attire but she found an adequate explanation. 'They'll think that, coming

from the hospital, I had but time to change my shoes.'

Now she stood next to the general, tall and disdainful, surveying the hastily patched up frocks worn by the officials' wives and saying with an invariable smile:

"You look very sweet, my dear..."

The prefect shook hands affably with the guests, but he was consumed with fear. 'What will *they* do? And what would *he* do especially if they did not come?' Baron Papp had sent word that he was very sorry but the state of his health was so precarious that the physicians were justified in being anxious and he was compelled to decline the kind invitation that attempted to bring an old man out of the seclusion to which old age and the miseries attending upon it, had irremediably condemned him.

The Velceanu couple came, he wearing his dark blue uniform which made him look like the porter of a big hotel, she in a long, black dress, cut very low in front. Behind them, like a lackey, came Suslănescu. He had put on a black coat of everlasting cloth which had been his father's; it was rather too wide for him, had sagging shoulders and it was cut away so widely in front, that it showed a white *piqué* waistcoat. He was wearing a blue and claret-coloured bow-tie whose wings hung limply, despite all his efforts in front of the looking-glass. He was pale, looking as if he were about to faint, and his tearful eyes peered around in terror. After lengthy troubled cogitations he had reached the conclusion that if he came together with the Velceanu couple, his presence would not be noticed. The prefect took his hand, affectionately.

"I'm so glad... we couldn't find you."

"It's just a way he has of disappearing," said Mrs. Velceanu possessively, and Suslănescu was petrified.

Immediately after them, came Corian in his eternal green coat, crumpled and threadbare. The huge pile of his fleecy mane overlapped the collar of his striped shirt.

Suslănescu darted for him with outstreched arms, as if he had just found him again. Then Vîslan arrived, in evening dress, accompanied by Şendrea and by Miţi blushing with excitement. He introduced them good-naturedly.

"My protégés, my children, my friends, my family. He courteously kissed Mrs. Belega's slightly wrinkled hand, while scrutinizing with the corner of his eye, the general's face, watching out for some sign from him. The latter, however, pretended not to have seen him. He kept looking at the small door feeling more and more strained all the time but attentive to the din rising behind him. He shook hands with Benea absent-mindedly; the latter was in mufti but looked more like a policeman than ever. Then Belega started: through the door came Father Potra followed by Varga wearing a smart dinner-jacket. The general heaved a sigh of relief and smiling pleasantly, took a step to meet them:

"I'm glad... I'm so glad..." he said enthusiastically, and unwittingly gave his voice a tone of complicity which Varga caught on the wing. "But I don't see Mrs. Varga?"

"She's left town. She's left town," said Varga with great conviction, feeling he had to explain. "The heat is too terrible... Lucian was feeling ill. I couldn't detain them..."

He heard a voice behind him: it was Motzeanu arriving with his wife, a thin, stiff elderly woman, of whom people said that she was not quite normal. Varga did not manage to move on, so he was obliged to bow slightly.

She answered, pursing her thin lips:

"*Bonsoir...*"

"But this is a festivity... it's a fête, a genuine carnival," thundered the voice of general Mîndru who was struggling to get in through the door too narrow for his size. Together with Mîndru came, like a guard, Nicuşor Spinanţiu and Horia Papp, both dressed in the latest fashion and looking very boisterous:

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed Belega, patting the baron's son on the shoulder. "And what about dad?"

"He's ill," said the son puckering his pink face. "He's got high temperature. I wonder what it is this time..."

"Don't worry. The baron is a tough fellow, not easily broken."

Varga heard those words and felt enraged. 'Had they any hidden meaning?' He went towards a group among which he saw the tall figure of the headmaster, surrounded by Drăgan, Suslănescu, Corian and Father Crăioc.

Slowly, slowly, the shelter filled and it soon became very warm. The ventilators buzzed energetically, but all in vain, and the perspiration ran down the ladies' foreheads in streaks of wet powder. About nine they had all gathered: Dr. Remus Pordea, Dr. Guiașiu, Silviu Burtea, Colonel Papastate and Major Angheliu who, feeling offended avoided Vîslan.

The prefect looked at his watch and began to quake. He motioned to a sergeant who pushed a small platform forward, causing the guests to stare in surprise. Then a rustle was heard, and as though attracted by a magnet, all eyes turned towards the door. Indifferent as usual, impenetrable and keeping his distance, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, Paul Dărnescu made his appearance followed by von Mertsch — splendid in his warlike uniform — and by the German engineers. The prefect walked up to them, stiffly, and von Mertsch saluted him in a thundering voice:

"*Heil Hitler!*"

The prefect, disconcerted, made a vague gesture. The engineers lined up in front of him as though by order, bowed their heads quickly, then raised their hands too.

"*Heil Hitler!*"

There was such a deep silence that the stertorous, excited breathing of the guests could be heard.

The band struck up some perfunctory chords, then the prefect, accompaying the Germans, made for the small platform.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he said. "Before beginning this small fête, organized by the Rumanian-German Association, I thought it necessary to ask Major von Mertsch, our distinguished guest, to say a few words about the present situation. Major von Mertsch, a soldier with a brilliant career, fought on the Eastern front, taking part in the famous resistance at Velikie Lukii. With such invaluable practical experience he can give us a clear and thorough description of the present military situation which, from such a distance we... well... we cannot understand in its exact proportions.

"*Meine Damen und meine Herren!*" began von Mertsch.

Varga sat with his hands clasped in an attitude of ridiculous piety. He was not listening to the major's speech. He was only following the crystal glimmer of his monocle which, catching a ray of light, reflected it like a small mirror. How calm, how quiet, how self-confident! Could such people lose the war? But they've already lost it! They've lost it! Oh, if only this night were over! Oh, to be at home or at Lola's or at Potra's, anywhere! Who knows what a trap this is... He remembered the feast that Prince Alexandru Lăpușneanu gave to his boyars, which ended in a general massacre. "We demand Moțoc's head! We demand Moțoc's head!" * ... All right, but who is Moțoc? Slowly, very slowly, he looked round the room. Everywhere the same intent expression, without any sign of impatience or boredom: lips correctly closed, eyes riveted on the German... 'Hang it, what fools we are! The prestige of a foreign uniform or, maybe, of the battles fought by this fellow... What battles? Rot!' Then, with a shudder he said to himself that the coming of the German commission there, meant that everything had been arranged and that he had played the wrong card. He was sure he would be made responsible. And as though receiving a reply to this terrible question, he noticed Fritsch, the chemist, standing near the door, leaning against the wall. Tall, fair, stiff, his face cut by a deep scar, he was looking at them all with murderous superiority. Oh!

Suslănescu was leaning against Corian's shoulder. He was fascinated and could not take his eyes off the major's brawny figure. What a fine specimen of manhood! Every gesture possessed in it, like a core, a whole range of harsh, wild, fascinating movements: the jerky handling of the sword, the tight grasping of the automatic pistol. *Feuer!* And this deep chest-voice, which seemed to have been created to order, thrilled him...What was he saying? The content was quite immaterial, things that had been so often repeated. By using the German tactics of combining the action of the tanks with the attacks of the aviation, the Bolsheviks have managed to obtain temporary successes. The General Staff of the Reich had foreseen this, already at the beginning of the war. That accounts for the advance

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* A quotation from a classical Rumanian novel

of our forces into the heart of red Russia. Thus, in case anything should happen, we have left behind us a deep front where any movement is possible. The war was waged on foreign land...

'But now it is waged at Jassy!' Potra kept saying to himself enraged. 'It is being waged in our own country and we sit on listening... Oh Lord, take away this cup from me...'

"What's he saying? What's he saying?" asked Father Crăioc, tugging at the headmaster's sleeve.

"Hush!" the latter said motioning to him to be silent, but the priest with an old man's inquisitiveness, would not leave him alone.

"What's he saying? What's he talking about? Hey?"

Near the small platform, Mrs. Velceanu was showing her bosom provocatively, as though defying the major with her splendid womanhood. She felt against her shoulder her husband's impatient trepidation; he could not stand still more than one minute; he had to walk about, or smoke, and now he dared not put his cigarette in his mouth. "What a coward!" she commented contemptuously. "I've always had to do with cowardly men. Sandi too is always so frightened, poor little soul... But he's a child... "

Standing firmly on his two legs, his arms crossed on his breast like a Roman imperator, Motzeanu cast repeated poisonous looks at the temple of Varga, who was standing on his left. 'He's had the cheek to come. After what happened, after the words he said to me. This is more than impertinence, it's actual defiance of the most elementary rules. Well, no matter. I'll show him... This party isn't going to be a pleasure for him!'

Feeling that the attention of the audience was flagging, the major concluded his speech quickly, talking enthusiastically of the final victory which would crown the efforts of the Axis.

"Long may it live!" General Mîndru's bass voice boomed out. He also clapped his soft and wet cushiony palms, four times.

The major descended hastily, gazing fixedly and vacantly before him and walked up to Dărnescu. The latter was lolling in an arm-chair, his thick legs crossed. They remained severed from the others, giving the strange impression of an inapproachable statuary group.

Conversation started with difficulty; the topics which formerly suited such occasions, would have been out of keeping now and the one that concerned them all, gnawing at them like a hidden cancer, could not be spoken of. So during the first half hour, the hall had the strange aspect of a crowd of people gathering in the corners, according to preferences, and standing silent, not even daring to ask one another with their eyes: "Why are we here? How is all this going to end?"

General Belega soon realized the reason of the silence and of the general embarrassment, but all his efforts could not disperse them. It was lucky that his wife at least was active, going indefatigably from one person to another, asking the ladies about the state of their health and their children's progress at school, telling them about the numerous worries caused by her activity at the military hospital and begging them to come and help her:

"The poor soldiers! They sacrifice themselves for us!"

For Varga it was all a torture. He kept watching Motzeanu, as though fascinated, trying to see if he did not go near Fritsch. 'Like Judas — he thought — he'll sell me like Judas!' The comparison he had casually drawn between himself and Christ did not disturb him. He reckoned to himself: 'Yes, but he too is up to the neck in it...and if he starts jawing... But what if he has been an agent of the police for a long time and his presence among us is perfectly well justified?' He could not stand still. His patent leather shoes which he had worn very little, pinched terribly and creaked so loud, that at every step he expected everybody to turn and look at him... 'Who will ever reward me for these terrible sufferings and tortures? I wonder?' He realized that there was nothing in the world that could have fully rewarded him. How happy the others were! Velceanu who will not have to answer for anything, for he had always done only his duty: as prosecutor, he had to demand punishment, *dura lex sed lex.* Or Suslănescu: he was young, had a future before him. He went to headmaster Lucaci and asked him if he knew when the schools would open. The latter answered, bored, that he had not the slightest idea. Varga coughed as if the headmaster had offended him. Didn't he realize that what he was after, was

to find a trite topic they could thrash out to exhaustion. The headmaster however turned his back on him and started walking along the walls, his hands behind his back.

Though it was still early, the prefect decided to call in the soldiers carrying the trays with the drinks. And, indeed, the atmosphere revived. The clinking of the crystal glasses was as festive as if it were Xmas, and after a sip or two of wine, the eyes began to shine more vividly.

Suslănescu drank off three glasses one ofter the other. He turned defiantly towards Corian:

"Come on, my dear fellow! Let's drink."

"I see you're beginning to imitate me," said the latter in a friendly way. Very soon, however, the teasing side of his nature asserted itself. "Yes, now and again the *florilegium* of Mrs. Mimi's charms makes you drink a little too much. She has a back like a full moon so silvery does it shine!"

"Hush," said Suslănescu, trying to be shocked. "Hush! ... He was fond of Corian, the least practical fellow he had ever met, still in his presence he had the rare feeling, which he valued greatly, that life and all its everyday manifestations, which killed one's lofty expectations — was, in fact, only a big ballet which everybody danced gracefully or clumsily, with unnecessary gravity. And now Corian holding out his nicotine-stained finger, was the first to say:

"Do you see all those dead-alive? They're dead and they don't know it... And under the overwhelming perfumes of those ladies one feels the smell of carrion. You see, Alexe, they are all afraid, they all quake for something they have to protect: a home — four ridiculous brick walls, a family — a self-agreed union of slaves, and above all, those ladies and gentlemen are afraid of losing the comfort of their coffins... I, my friend, will die by the roadside, my eyes looking at the stars."

"You're talking nonsense," said Suslănescu pulling him by the arm.

Annoyed that Suslănescu did not take him seriously, Corian declared in a loud tone:

"The Russians will win the war!"

Shaking with fear, Suslănescu implored him to shut up, He could not stand this trait of Corian's. Whenever anyone

contradicted him, he would utter something terrible, designed to cause a row, regardless of the consequences.

Motzeanu was quite bewildered. While trying to keep up an appearance of serene assurance, he had lost no opportunity of scanning Varga. He would have liked to read on his face the same fear as that which boiled within him, but he saw nothing save the usual quiet, dignified and self-confident countenance.

"This man must know something," said Motzeanu in anguish. "He must, otherwise it would be impossible. After all, even a blind man could see we've lost the war... It would be impossible for a man so clever and so experienced as Mr. Maniu not to have taken all his precautions. The Jassy front being broken through (he had heard this on the B.B.C. before coming here) it is certain that the Russians will not stop... What shall I do, then? Just as I say: Varga must know something. His brother George knows all the closest secrets of the coutry's policy. He's a friend of Ică's*)... And Ică is a blackguard of fiendish intelligence. He wouldn't risk his life on a bad card... Certainly, as Remus was saying, he must have fled to Switzerland!. Why, didn't Hess flee to England too, at the very outbreak of the war? And if he didn't know how things stood in his own country, then who did... Hitler isn't a lunatic..."

At times, to cover up these stormy reflections which he thought terrible, Motzeanu turned round to his wife with a broad smile, showing all his teeth. She would ask him:

"Have you not had too much to drink? Be careful you do not bring on a fit of your liver complaint..."

"Don't you worry," he would stammer, collecting himself. That would be the last straw, if his liver began troubling him now. Perhaps it would be better so. He took a glass from a tray and emptied it. "Yes, I'll die and have done with all this. What's Varga doing? What is he doing?" he wondered, frightened to death.

With a glass in his hand and smiling in a friendly and self-confident way, Varga was the first to walk towards Dărnescu's arm-chair. When he got there he bowed slightly,

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* Familiar by-name of Mihai Antonescu, prime-minister during Marshal Antonescu's fascist regime

almost condescendingly and clinked glasses. Motzeanu, unable to contain himself any longer, took three steps in the same direction. His wife followed him quickly. She knew he was of a violent disposition and did not want any unpleasant incident to happen. Emilică had told her about his row with Varga and now she looked upon the latter with fierce hatred.

"We haven't met for quite a long time, my dear Dărnescu," said Varga serenely, in a clear voice. "Here's to you, my dear friend. "Then half turning to the left, he bowed to the German major who ('what's come over him ?' thought Varga, in a panic) held out his hand and shook Varga's very affably:

"*Ich bin enchanté, mein Herr,*" said Varga, bowing delighted. "*Richtig enchanté.*"

Dărnescu was looking at him with his eyes large and heavy like two onions, streaked with small red veins. He looked like a well-fed whale. Varga had never been able to make out what this man was after. The part he played at the factory had not been very clear to him either, nor had all the story of this enterprise, set up some fifteen years earlier with money from the State and from some private persons (people said that a big English manufacturer was behind it, but who could know the truth...). Dărnescu had been the real boss although he was only the assistant manager. It was a mystery which even Varga's juridical ability had not succeeded in solving.

To his surprise, Major von Mertsch spoke Rumanian fairly well and seemed more than delighted, simply happy to be able to talk to him.

"How do you get on with Horoviţă ?" Dărnescu asked him, in a thick, rolling voice.

"Well... so, so... You know, I almost regret that..."

Dărnescu looked at him curiously.

"Is that so ?" he replied. "I didn't know that."

"You should have questioned me first, my dear Dărnescu. You know that I have always placed public interests before any petty personal considerations."

"How could I have known ?" said Dărnescu indifferently, but in no way offensively.

"I'm afraid our friend is on suspiciously good terms with these people," whispered Remus Pordea mysteriously into Motzeanu's ear. The latter turned crimson.

"Yes... and his former stubbornness seems all the stranger," he said between his teeth. "I have always loathed the filthy wretch."

"I too," added Pordea emphatically, but he immediately subsided and became meek. "Old man," he moaned, "we ought to... we too ought to... you know... we..."

"Oh, really" said Motzeanu in astonishment. In fact, he too had thought of the same thing and was impatiently waiting for Varga to leave, that he might take his place.

"Why, don't you think it would be wise?"

"Not at all," growled Motzeanu. "I won't have anything to do with tyrants."

"Emil," said his wife pinching his arm, "are you mad?"

"I'm sorry..." and he turned to Pordea: "Caution!"

The atmospere had thawed. The bottles were soon emptied and Belega thought it was time the party really began. He went behind the curtain that concealed the band and made a sign. The first bars of the national anthem resounded.

The groups stiffened. Lucaci, a little deaf, could not realize where the sounds were coming from, and turned towards the door, with his back to the band. Crăioc stood open-mouthed, overcome by an almost religious emotion; general Mîndru violently pushed out his enormous belly and pressed his hands along imaginary piping, whilst Corian stood there, a cigarette burning in the corner of his mouth, the smoke making his eyes water. Suslănescu stood as straight as he could: the strains of the anthem always moved him deeply — was it not one of the components of the notion "homeland," together with the three-coloured flag and the picture of the throne under a purple canopy? Motzeanu's face bore such a solemn, petrified expression that he looked like his own death-mask. He had raised his forehead as though he felt a wind of glory blowing on it. Remus Pordea was looking around to see if people noticed how touched he was, while, in the middle of the hall, general Belega, a superb figure, was saluting, as though the anthem was addressed to him personally. At the moment when the trumpets struck up the higher pit-

ched part of the anthem: "Oh, Lord, oh, most holy Lord..." Father Potra prayed for His Majesty's health. Then, without any transition, over their heads boomed the haughty strains of *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles* and, as if pulled by a string, features became harsher, jaws clenched almost to a gnashing point; they tried vainly but deservingly to draw in their bellies so deeply as to make them touch their spine. Slowly, solemnly, Varga lifted his arm for the Roman salute, followed immediately, as quick as lightning, by Motzeanu and by everybody else.

All eyes turned, as if at on order, in homage towards von Mertsch. 'Splendid' thought Belega. 'The reception has reached its object.'

While the last notes rang out, thunderously, heroically, some flashes of magnesium light gushed out. It was Vîslan photographing the audience. Varga quickly let his arm fall, as though he had a cramp in his fore-arm. But it was too late.

'That's it, you blackguards,' Vîslan was saying to himself, a prey to boisterous joy. 'That's it, you heroes of the resistance! You'll hear some more about this, you despisable swine!'

Then the orchestra struck up a waltz by Strauss and for a second the guests perplexed, after such a violent emotion, were at a loss what to do. Von Mertsch crossed the room with a firm step, bowed slightly in front of Mrs. Belega, and they both began to dance, he composedly and stiff, she trying to recapture the former feline suppleness and the sweet, very sweet intoxication of bygone days. Suslănescu put his arm round Mimi. She pressed close to him, boldly, and Suslănescu blushed, in raptures.

"My sweet," she whispered to him, "my sweet, wouldn't it be heaven if we were at home, only the two of us, in bed ?"

"Please, please," stammered Suslănescu. "I shall take all the responsibility... You'll see... Only not just now ...Not now... please, Marie..."

"How clumsily you dance," she said peevishly." Take me back to my seat. You're spoiling my shoes."

"I'm sorry."

When Suslănescu, stepping backwards, had led her to Velceanu, she realized she was the only lovely woman in the room. The rest of them were crooked, wrinkled old hags.

Three officers rushed upon her at the same time, quarrelling for the honour of a dance. Suslănescu, heartbroken, went up to Corian who had taken up his comfortable abode by the buffet and kept drinking. The latter realized Suslănescu was upset and comforted him:

"Why do you mind? Don't you know a woman thinks with her ovaries?"

"Don't say such things!" Suslănescu begged, almost in tears. "Don't say such things to me. She's a saint..."

"You're a martyr, you little lamb... you're... You've even got a halo round your head. Let's drink!"

Taking advantage of the fact that Varga had stood up to join the dance, Motzeanu dashed towards Dărnescu whom he overwhelmed with compliments; he went into raptures over his appearance. "One would never think your heart isn't quite in order," he said and then begged him:

"*Mon cher*, introduce me to the allies...They're quite remarkable." And when he shook hands with engineer Ambrosius he could hardly refrain from congratulating him on the success obtained by the commission. Just in time, a last remnant of caution prevented him from doing it. He sat down on a chair, as though not intending to move from there. Dărnescu did not say a word: he just looked at him as if he were of glass; this did not baffle Motzeanu in the least. Then came Pordea and Guiaşiu, so that, when Varga wanted to get his seat back, he found it occupied. After a moment's hesitation, he walked up to the group. They were all silent.

Waltzes, fox-trots, rumbas and very popular tunes, such as "Lili Marlen," "Sehnsucht" and "Rose Marie," succeeded one another. Everyone felt, however, that very soon, maybe in half an hour, everything would slow down and droop into dreadful boredom. Varga was thinking: 'Just you wait, you scoundrels, now you're becking and bowing to the Germans and to Dărnescu... You'll answer for it... If I am here, it's for caution's sake, but you? You're here because of your impotent fear!'

Motzeanu tried, at intervals, and after genuine inner tortures which made him perspire abundantly, to start a conversation; he smiled up to Dărnescu as if he were a *prima donna*, but all his attempts met with Dărnescu's

silence. The German engineers had come to the buffet and were blissfully eating sandwiches, salads, cold meat which they methodically washed down with glasses of wine. Around them an empty space had formed, as though no one dared disturb the pleasant and important operation.

Vîslan followed everything with growing satisfaction. He had been careful with the wine — he had drunk just enough to become "extra-lucid" as he liked to put it — and now his ideas came, clear and consistent. 'I was right, we are a nation of flunkeys. The traces left by Gipsies, Greeks and Jews have become our predominant trait.' He kept trying to catch Suslănescu's eye and to convey to him victoriously, by a sort of optical telegraphy: 'You see, old man ? Didn't I tell you ? You see ?' But the teacher who had got drunk was napping leaning against Corian's shoulder who was pouring into his ear the subtle poison of his theories.

"Life ? Rot! Listen to what I say. Let's leave all this, and go to my place, to my estate. We'll live there as happy as a king. Listen to my programme: we'll sleep till ten, then go for a walk, barefooted, over the well-mown lawn, then a good meal on a blanket in the sacred shade of a century-old walnut-tree... Oh, for the bitter smell and the gorgeous sight... The lake in which the weeping willows dip their golden tips, the swans sailing regally, the gold fishes leaping up at times in a rainbow-tinted shower of light and drops, the silvery sedge soughing silkily, and the water-lilies in bloom... Listen to me, Alexe, let's go there, to my estate..."

"All right. But we could go to my place too," offered Suslănescu courteously. "A manor house of the time of Prince Brîncoveanu, old chap! The large heavy table in the dining-room at which my ancestor Ivancu Stroe Suslănescu of Jumărești used to sit... If you like, we could dress up in his costumes, we've still got a lot of them... A long coat, a tall fur-cap, a dagger in the waistband, a narghile with an amber mouthpiece; or we might don a fez with a Russian leather tassel..."

"Yes, Alexe man, yes... And we'd call in the gipsy slave-women and we'd have such a time, what with dances, and whoopee!"

"That's not quite *dix-huitième siècle* style... it's a parody, rather."

"Let's drink..."

Finally, after much reticence, and to Motzeanu's great annoyance, Varga had started talking politics.

"Your speech, Major," he said as though addressing an audience (he was thus trying to conceal the compliment he meant to squeeze in), "was most eloquent... The truth is history has known all sorts of reverses but..."

"History does not repeat itself," specified von Mertsch politely.

"But that was just what I was going to say," Varga hurried to add. "The material and particularly the moral resources of Germany are inexhaustible..."

"And there is another factor we must not forget," put in the major who to Varga's great delight appeared very high-browed, "we must not forget that between Bolshevik Russia and plutocratic England and America there are antagonisms. I assure you that the Western countries are perfectly well aware that we are crusaders. As a matter of fact, we are defending the bases of civilization here."

"Rumania has played this role throughout her history," said Varga noticing a sarcastic twinkle in the major's eyes. "Partially, naturally," he hastened to add.

"Yes, she has had this role," granted von Mertsch quickly.

"Madam, you dance like a fairy," Second-lieutenant Ghica was whispering into Mrs. Velceanu's ear... For me who every day play with death..."

"Oh, how can you talk like that..."

"I assure you the game is as pleasant... as making love, if not pleasanter. You soar up into the blue sky and fly... and fly... whew!" but he could not find any other word lofty enough.

"Won't you take me up with you once?"

"I should be delighted, any day... Why not tomorrow? I'll come and fetch you with my car."

"And if there is an air-raid while we are both high up?"

"I'll fight, madam, with ten times more courage..."

She pressed closer to him.

Concealed behind an aspidistra like an Inca, Vîslan had photographed the group round Dărnescu. He was

beside himself with joy. 'How well, things sometimes turn out, how splendidly they right themselves... Yesterday I thought I was lost, dead, and now... just look at this. Why, I'm actually saved. No matter what happens!'

He thrust his camera into his pocket and walked, staggering slightly, towards the prefect whom he asked if he did not think a *compte-rendu* of this splendid reception should appear in the "Tribuna Romînă."

The prefect looked at him with an amused air.

"Vîslan, you are the most extraordinary chameleon that I've ever come across in my life."

Vîslan accepted this statement as a compliment. He laughed a hollow laugh.

"Life," he said, "is a dance. Some can dance it, others can't, but all keep their legs moving."

"You are a *maître danseur*... and a *maître chanteur*," said Belega sarcastically, knowing that Vîslan would not understand him.

"What can you expect? Every bird has its own song!"

After talking for almost an hour with the Dărnescu group, Varga felt satisfied. He had the feeling of having done his duty, so he began to think of his own amusement. He cast a circular glance around the room but, apart from Mrs. Velceanu, he did not see any attractive woman. She was so closely surrounded by all kinds of young officers that he would have seemed ridiculous to interfere. He went to the buffet to refresh himself. He was quite at peace now. 'They can't get at me,' he said to himself, self-satisfied. 'I'm past-master in this sort of diplomacy.'

He felt sprightly, inclined to talk nonsense as he used to do at the youthful age of nineteen. At the buffet he clinked glasses with Lucaci, who greeted him so formally as though he had not seen him before. The latter asked:

"Have you listened in?"

"To what?" said Varga.

"Why, at Jassy the front has been broken through. The town fell today. Or yesterday."

"What?" asked Varga breathless? "What?"

"Yes. It's all over. In ten days they'll be in Bucharest."

"Who?"

"Why, what's the matter with you? Have you had too much to drink? The Russians of course, who else?"

"Hush!" Varga hissed in a strained voice and grimacing. "Hush! for goodness' sake."

"But what's the matter with you, Mr. Varga?" asked Lucaci sullenly.

"Nothing... hush!"

He turned his back on him. He had forgotten everything. In this festive atmosphere he had felt like in 1942, the year of the great victories, and it was at this minute only that he saw the low ceiling of the shelter, the peeling walls, and heard the creaking of shoes on the cement floor — it was not the shining parquet of a sumptuous hall, but a shelter — and they, all those people who were dancing and drinking, were vainly looking for a shelter, somewhere. He again went to the buffet and started gulping down brandy, glass after glass. When the spirits had gone to his head, he said to himself he could understand nothing of all that was going on. The game was being played somewhere, above his head, in spheres inaccessible to thought: closed, mysterious offices, great men, personalities as cunning as serpents, a pyramid in which he was a grain of sand. But, if it was so, he was exonerated from what he had done, for, indeed, what did his earnings, his law-suits, his political activity mean, here at the periphery of a country situated at the periphery of the universe? Nothing. And, why should he have to answer for them all? There was really no reason. Maybe some people's jealousy. People like Motzeanu, for instance. 'What if he went and asked to be forgiven?' (the thought flashed through his mind). It would be a Christian thing to do, even if he was innocent, or maybe just because he was so. And if Motzeanu would snub him or insult him? Well, in that case he would be avenged. He knew a number of dirty things committed by Motzeanu, enough to discredit him publicly for ever. He would pursue him with his fierce hatred, step by step, and strike him in all that he held dearest... Yes... yes... He would do so in any case, but now he had better go to him. Potra would approve of him if he knew.

He rose from his chair and went towards Dărnescu. He stopped near the arm-chair in which Motzeanu

was sitting and dozing. Varga laid his hand on his shoulder.

"I want to speak to you," he said blinking nervously.

"Yes... of course, why not," said the other blushing. "Gladly."

Suslănescu went straight to Mimi and, without asking leave, took her in his arms, dragging her to the middle of the room. Ghica was left dumbfounded. 'Who the devil is this bully?' he wondered. 'He's been seized by a desire to shake a leg just when I'd arranged a date... Damn him!'

"Mimi, I beg you, I beseech you to be my wife. Be the mother of our children. Leave this man with whom you aren't happy."

He spoke breathlessly, passionately.

She pushed him gently away.

"You're drunk, Sandi." ('She's no longer angry,' he said to himself. 'She isn't.')

"You're the hope of my life."

"That's what they say in love songs..."

"Mimi, why are you so cruel?"

"My dear Emil — Varga was saying to Motzeanu at the other end of the room, gripping the lapel of his coat — please listen to me. Before I tell you anything, I beg you to accept my apologies for ... hm... for that outburst... I could not control myself... a number of misfortunes. You see what I mean."

"Of course I do," said Motzeanu, puffing up his chest grandly. "Things like that have happened to me too." ('Of course they have, you pig!' thought Varga enraged.)

"Lucian ill, my family away, all alone, nobody to comfort me... danger always lurking..."

"Quite so... quite so..."

"Look here... we're Rumanians, aren't we?... The same family... We must be united in these hard painful times." His chin began to tremble. He was almost weeping with humiliation.

"My dear Salvator... here's my hand... Forgive me..."

They embraced.

"Let's go to the buffet," Varga proposed. (And still, he did feel a bit relieved, better, nobler.)

"With pleasure... D'you know, I think we attracted public notice too much when we spoke with... those..."

"Not at all!" said Varga waving his hand, superiorly. "Hang it! We couldn't have shot them, could we?"

"You know, it seems the baron is really seriously ill."

Varga frowned, then relaxed. Now he changed moods very rapidly.

"Yes. Old age."

"Yes... here's to you..."

"Long live Rumania!" whispered Varga as though he had uttered a subversive pass-word.

"Yes ... Long may she live!"

Father Crăioc was in the best of spirits. He was arguing with Potra, under the impression that he was at the Nicoea Great Council where the bases of the holy and true faith were laid.

"*Filioque! Filioque* be blasted, Potra! Only from the Father, believe me. The Orthodox faith has kept the Rumanian nation awake. You, the Uniates, you've forgotten your nation, you are denationalized. In the town of Carei there are Rumanians who can only speak Hungarian. What have you to say to that?"

Potra did not say anything; he only gazed at him in disgust. He could not explain why, but Father Crăioc seemed to smell of whey. Moreover the old man was a little tipsy and rather too merry.

"As for the Pope, listen to this:' An old palace in Rome is the wealthy Pope's home'... Ha, ha!... that's what people sing..."

"Father, it does not befit Your Reverence..."

"Heresy, heresy," roared Crăioc, gesticulating merrily and thrusting his fingers into his red waistband.

Mr. Velceanu, the prosecutor, followed what his wife was doing, anxiously. What could he say to her? What was the good of it all? How could he have known twelve years ago that he was marrying a Bacchante? His mother had been right, but he had been so madly in love at the time! And she... Oh, how she had played with him! She used to caress his forehead which was beginning to grow bald, and to comfort him: "It does not matter, I'll love you for ever."

Then, on their wedding night, she had told him, sobbing aloud, like the inmate of a brothel, the well known doubtful story of the cavalry officer who had seduced her. Oh, his youthful ideals!... He remembered today's case: a deserter sentenced to death... How he had got used to the eyes that grow abnormally large when the decisive words fall like the knife of the guillotine: "To be shot for having betrayed his country." Or the group of communists whom he had cross-examined that week... Old Mihai Jurca — yes, that was his name — so quiet and calm. Those men are either fanatics like the early Christians, or... Look how she's pressing herself against the young officer, the bitch... the bitch...

He went to the buffet where a lot of people had gathered. Corian, a man of experience, had been careful to secure a few bottles. He called him near them:

"Sit down," he said offering him a chair near Suslănescu; then he drew back a little to enjoy the picture. The husband and the lover... One of the lovers...

Suslănescu had turned green in the face. He almost fell over Velceanu, mumbling tearfully:

"Mr. Velceanu... sir... I... I am so grateful to you! In your home I have found that... gratitude... no, no, that's not the word... that warmth... Your dear lady... Mrs. Velceanu has been like a mother to me..."

Disgusted, Velceanu wondered: 'He too?'

During the quarter of an hour, in which Varga and Motzeanu had made it up, the most intimate friendship was formed between them. They felt so close to one another that Varga began to forget the fierce promises of revenge that he had made before. He said to Motzeanu in a veiled way:

"I understand now what the strength of Christianity consists of, old man. What happiness fills your soul, when you've... humbled yourself."

"What's come over you?" asked the other soberly.

Vîslan had seated himself in a comfortable arm-chair, in the shade of the potted palms, like in a miniature equatorial grove.

"What a dance! What a dance!" he commented, feeling extraordinarily satisfied. "Just look at them! All in pairs: Varga with Motzeanu, Suslănescu with Velceanu,

Dărnescu with the Mertsch fellow, Crăioc with Potra, Mimi with Freddie... Faugh! What a sight! And they turn, and turn, like mad. What do they care? They've got money, a house and peace of mind. But I, a vagrant... I shall show them something grand! I've got them in the hollow of my hand... A fine company!... There's Benea too, walking with his hands behind his back, watching that they do not steal one another's watch, or someone steal the lot of them. What a head mine is! You'd think I'm a poet. Where's Jacquot to see all this?"

The memory of his friend made him cool down a bit. Robber had written a few articles for him, which Vîslan could not pay, and he kept sending him letters every day, drafted somehow as follows: "I would never had thought that the mask of a journalist concealed the hairy snout of a troglodyte. I warn you there are institutions in this country, namely the police, and that we do not live in a desert or in the jungle, and you'll get it from me... My honesty, Mr. Vîslan, cannot be called in question..." Oh, what he'd do to that blear-eyed Jew, to that godless good-for-nothing! If only the times returned when he... Never-mind, everything will come right, in the end.

Presently a group consisting of Varga, Pordea, Guiașiu, Potra, Burtea and Lucaci was formed in a corner. They did not say anything to one another; they just gathered for a moment, then parted. Most of them were rather the worse for drink.

Varga did not know what he was doing. He held a fragment of a speech: "Gentlemen, Rumania, our beloved... she... her sacred name, no! Our army and our country..." then staggering past Mimi he whispered to her: "You're as sweet as candy," and she answered coquettishly: "But not meant for you, Mr. Salvator"; he clapped Velceanu on the shoulder:

"*Sursum corda!*" and then found himself in front of the prefect whom he thanked for the privilege of having been invited to this gorgeous Sardanapalian party. The circuit came to an end by the side of Motzeanu who, when drunk, was sombre and declared:

"Bolshevism! A plague! I'm not afraid! The Rumanian people are inoculated. I-no-cu-la-ted! The peasants

side with us... All honest-minded people side with us... But I'm drunk... I've got a pain in my liver..."

Father Crăioc had fallen asleep, his hands clasped on his belly, and he was snoring in three tones. Varga felt himself swaying as though he were on the deck of a ship. He would have liked the party to go on for a month until, leaving the shelter, they would find the whole country in order and everybody taking the place that had been reserved for them. 'What time could it be?' He produced his watch with difficulty, crushing his shirt-front. "Hang it all!... quarter to five. How time flies!"

The band made a short pause and Corian sat down at the piano. He started playing a funeral march with melodramatic snorts and loud screams of grotesque fear.

"Dear me, who's playing that?" called out Mimi, drunk by now.

Velceanu came up to her, gripped her by the hand and, not caring about the people, said between his clenched teeth into her ear:

"Let's go home!"

"I haven't the slightest intention of going home," she said defiantly.

Corian rose from the piano and in the silence that followed — after such noisy music and dancing the talking seemed like the rustle of sedge — the plaintive and irritating creaking of the door was heard. An officer in full regimentals, a helmet on his head, entered and, coming up to the prefect, saluted, then said:

"Mr. Dărnescu is wanted on the telephone."

Dărnescu rose heavily. He did not seem a bit tired after the sleepless night.

'What can this mean?' wondered the prefect in astonishment. 'Who could ring him up at this time of night?'

The band began to play again but the dancers no longer seemed inclined to move. Most of them were feeling tired and were dozing. The ladies seemed nervous. The prefect was sleepy. After a time — no one could have told how long — Dărnescu came in. He was ghostly pale: he, always so quiet and self-controlled; all who saw him were appalled. Dărnescu walked up to the prefect unsteadily,

put his arms round his neck like a drunkard and whispered lengthily into his ear.

"Look at them," whispered Motzeanu." Look at them, old man. Look at Dărnescu."

"The general's turned pale."

"What is it?"

"They're both leaving."

"Where are they going?"

In alarm, the prefect's wife ran after them, rather awkwardly, because of her high heels not suited for such steps.

"What's happened, Laurenţiu?"

"Mind your own business," shouted the prefect.

Everybody stood petrified.

"For God's sake..."

"There's an alert!"

"An air-raid alert!"

"*Was? Fliegeralarm?*"

"Please, madam, don't worry, "Ghika said to comfort Mimi Velceanu, while caressing her back with the hot palm of his hand. "If it's an air-raid, we the aviators are the first to be called. No matter where we are at the time. Don't worry."

The room was astir. The guests had revived and were walking up and down the room, watching the door. When the band began to play, shouts were heard from all sides:

"Hush! Quiet! Quiet!"

"Why are they so long?"

"I can't understand, what's happened."

"Maybe the Russians..."

"You're mad! Shut up.!"

"My ancestor had... thousands of acres," Suslănescu was mumbling, "thousands. He was such a great boyar that..."

"But why aren't they returning?"

"Mr. Vîslan, what do you think?"

"Well... well..." the latter said, as white as a sheet. "What could have happened? The Russians have broken through the front at Jassy. Yes, I knew that. That happened a few days ago or was it yesterday?... Oh, maybe they've reached Bîrlad... Galatz... that's all. Why was Dărnescu so scared I wonder? If even he?"

"Let's go home!"

"A capital idea, let's go. It's late."

"I'm worried because of the children."

"Why, darling?"

"Who knows what might happen?"

"What?"

"Haven't you read? The Bolsheviks..."

"Madam, do not worry, I implore you," Ghica was pressing her, not caring that people saw him, delighted by the suppleness of her body...

"I'm frightened, Freddie... Will you defend me?"

"What do you think about it, Mr. Varga?"

"I don't know... I'm not the *Kappelmeister* am I?"

"Seems a rising has broken out.."

"A... what?" Varga said, coming to himself. He rapidly made certain mental connexions: the baron, his absence, his negotiations with the communists, a revolution... "Yes, yes, Papp had mentioned that, a *coup d'état* ... How? Here in the province?" He ran to Benea who was smoking a thick cigar, undisturbed.

"Mr. Benea..."

"Be calm," said Benea smiling. "Why are you so scared?"

"And Laurenţiu's so late in returning!" exclaimed Mrs. Belega wringing her hands. "If anything's wrong, he's quite capable of going personally and sacrificing himself. I never met anyone with such a power of self-sacrifice..."

"Let's go out in the courtyard, maybe we can hear something."

"A good idea..."

A few moved towards the exit, but at that very moment the door opened and Belega appeared, revolver in hand, followed by seven officers likewise armed.

"Oh! oh! oh!" shrieked a lady hysterically.

Livid, with lips trembling and bitten till they bled, the general crossed the shelter with firm steps, followed by the officers.

Varga uttered a muffled howl like a butchered animal. 'Me Me!' He felt Motzeanu's nails digging into his skin, scratching him. The latter's face was like molten wax. All his wrin-k les, his lines, seemed to run down to his chin. The general's spurs rattled on the floor. There he is. He has stopped in

front of von Mertsch and the Germans. "For God's sake! For God's sake! What is it? What's happened?"

"Major," articulated the general in a trembling voice. "I am compelled to declare you my prisoner. This night at Bucharest, Rumania came out of the Axis and signed an armistice."

The officers surrounded the Germans, disarming them. The group went out quickly. In the doorway, the major's monocle fell and broke.

Silence.

No one stirred. Everyone's breathing could be heard...

And suddenly, a loud, hollow shriek:

"Long... live... Rumania!" Varga gaped, then began to sob: "Gentlemen... gentlemen..."

The prefect was surrounded by a lot of people, who pulled him about; feverish fingers tugged at his epaulets, his shoulders, his Sam Browne belt, even the tags of his pockets.

"General... General... details!... details!"

"Be quiet, gentlemen!" his voice quivered, his broken, confused words could hardly come out of his throat... "Gentlemen... a little patience."

"How do you know? What happened?"

"General..."

"Long... live... Rumania!..." Varga, kept sobbing. He did not know why he was crying, he simply had to cry.

"Mr. Dărnescu was told over the telephone this very minute. Then we listened in to Radio-Donau which broadcasts news every ten minutes."

"Long live the King! Long live the King!" roared Motzeanu with wide gestures, leaping up like a child.

"That is all I can tell you for the moment, that's all I could make out from the slanderous bleatings of the *Boches*..."

Varga started howling at the top of his voice:

Long live the King
God save our gracious King...

But the moment the band struck up the anthem, his thoughts started scampering away like hares. 'What are you going to do now? Peace... peace... But... but...'

He withdrew from among the crowd; he would have liked to bury his forehead in his hands. A sharp feeling of uneasiness, as though he had been stabbed with a knife, unexpectedly, was torturing him. 'And what now? Will the English and Americans reach this place before the Russians? For, if they don't... If... If they don't ... 'and fear, like a broken spring, uncoiled within him. 'But if the Germans should still win the war? And would it not be better if they did? They had behaved badly... Transylvania and so on, and so forth... but... but if the English don't come in time?'

He tried to forget those questions; he felt like singing but his voice rang out hollow:

... Loving... his... country

The din was growing louder and louder, drowning everything; the ladies were making wide gestures, shrieking; some of the men were singing, corks popped with a bang. Then the song grew louder again. It's another song now, no it's not, everybody is singing something else.

Potra with his eyes closed sang:

Priests carry crosses, for the host is a Christian army..."

Motzeanu was roaring like a bull and hiccoughing:

We'll give you all our country
And more if you do want;
But leave us our language
They rose to...

He didn't know the next lines... Who rose? The heroes, most likely. "Long life to them! Hail! Hail!"

Peace again, the good old times of yore!

Father Crăioc, with his cracked voice was singing:

Oh, valiant sword of Trajan
Return to me, a Roman
That I may swing you once more
O'er the lands we owned before!

Leaning on Freddie's arm, Mrs. Mimi was weeping with joy. Oh, God! how tears relieved her, as though they

were something else... It's so nice to weep by the side of a hero! She whispered to him:

"Tell me, aren't you glad?

Gloomily, harshly, he answered:

"Madam, this is treason! I can't... I can't:..."

"Let's dance, let's dance!" shrieked Guiaşiu. "We've got the right to do so now. Our efforts have been crowned with success. Band! A *hora!* *"

"Well, I never..." said Vîslan staggering and leaning against the wall." So that's what it was. So that's how it's ended? It's a miracle, God's miracle. Oh, God, we'll blot out all the traces..."

He dashed to the door, carrying his camera like a treasure.

"Şendrea!" he roared to the young man who had sat all the night hidden in a dark corner, together with Miţi. "Şendrea! Come on, my boy! Let's listen to the news! Special issue... Thousands of copies... Hurrah! I wish you a good time, gentlemen!..."

Benea stole out with Vîslan. "Quick, to the police office. We must put away all the papers, all of them, to the last... Where's Fritsch? I don't believe he's been arrested. He's vanished..."

In the middle of the room a big *hora* had been started; undulating like a serpent, it tried to adapt itself to the shelter, too small for such a large crowd forming one single chain. The band played as loud as possible, and louder still were the dancers singing:

We, with a true Rumanian heart,
Our linked hands let's never part!

"We, with a true Rumanian heart," repeated Potra dancing heavily and tripping in the skirts of his cassock. "We, with a true Rumanian heart. The time has come when the just will be rewarded and the wicked will be punished."

"Hurrah!" cried Corian happy that there was a din, that all the people had lost their heads, that all those unhappy devils, those lunatics, didn't realize they had been dead a long time. Corpses dancing... *Danse macabre*... Saint Saëns never saw such a thing...

* Rumanian folk dance

One man alone has not the might
'gainst hardships to put up a fight!

"Hey, up!" yelled lawyer Guiaşiu — as peasants call when dancing — twisting and spinning round like a top. He very much resembled a cricket. He could not remember the words of the "Union Hora," so he improvised:

Oh, lush green leaf of rye,
May all our en'mies die!
We, with a true Rumanian heart...

Suslănescu could not rise from his chair. Tears were streaming down his face, his features distorted.

"Oh, poor Germany..."

He passed his hand over his eyes, over his forehead.

"We've forsaken them... The courtliness of war... Why did we do it ? Why ? And all those here do not realize... They're glad they've escaped, with their houses, furniture and clothes untouched... And they don't understand that we..."

The feet stamped the cement floor in frenzy, but not in rhythm. The fatigue had vanished. They had to dance.

"That's the stuff, my dear!" Father Crăioc urged on Mrs. Belega. "Swing'em faster!" Make the cement throw out sparks!"

"It's peace at last!"

The *hora* came to an end.

"The anthem! the anthem!" screamed Crăioc. "I want to hear the English anthem."

Varga was sober now. Enthusiasm was seething in his heart. France... Larisse's legs... Napoleon.

He cried:

"Wait! Let's remember our elder sister! Let's remember France!"

"Yes, France," said Suslănescu shuddering... "*Vive la France immortelle!*"

Allons enfants de la Pátrie
Le jour de gloire est arrivé.
...Aux armes, citoyens...
Formez vos bataillons...

May he for ever reign over us...

Potra succeeded in silencing them for a moment. He stretched out his arms and looked like an immense crow about to take wing, but his gesture was so convincing that they were all silent for a second, enough for him to be able to begin in his grave slightly tremulous voice:

God is with us, understand you nations and bow low.
For God is with us...

They all knelt on the cold cement covered with the dust raised by the dancing couples. Mimi Velceanu felt that her stocking had run a ladder up to her knee, but she did not care. She bent her forehead, almost touching the floor.

Understand you nations, and bow low.

They all rose to their feet. Then followed the kissing, like on New Year's Eve.

"My best wishes, dear."

"Peace! peace!"

Crăioc would have liked to sing something else. He did, grunting as though to himself:

...and the archangel in heaven!

He stopped. Oh, this is what Mihail Dante used to sing when he was a legionary. Better take care.

"Father, your blessing!"

Potra whispered:

"Let us pray..."

All the time the singing and the dancing had lasted General Belega had stood motionless, looking like a pillar around which all this jumble had gravitated. Some one touched him on the arm shyly. He turned, suddenly scared. Velceanu, with a ghostly countenance, whispered to him rapidly:

"For God's sake, General, it's awful!"

"I know, smiled the prefect pleasantly. We were expecting the armistice but not so soon..."

He shrugged his big shoulders, and his epaulets catching a ray from the big chandeliers, glittered dazzlingly. Velceanu, maybe the only sober person among all those

lunatics who did not realize how things stood, seemed to him dismal, ominous.

"Shall we be taken to task?" asked the prosecutor slowly, childishly.

"By whom?" muttered Belega absent-mindedly. "We've done nothing but our duty... We're officials... and orders..."

"Shouldn't we leave with the Germans?"

"No!"

The prefect took one step forward. raised his hands and said:

"Gentlemen, our fête has ended happily for all... for our country, for ourselves. As we are in an exceptional situation, duty compels me to ask you to return quietly to your homes, but not in groups. I must ring up Bucharest right away."

"Long live the prefect!"

"Three cheers for General Belega!"

The singing however was contagious and, once they were out in the courtyard, under the sharp coolness of the murky grey sky, they would have liked to shout and be merry. But the town was plunged in darkness. Not one electric bulb was burning, like in old times...

And all of a sudden, the guests coming out of the gate, saluted by the sleepy sentry, stopped short. From the middle of the street came the sound of footsteps, then men appeared out of the dark, and a song, a song pouring out heavily, ruggedly, made them stand still in astonishment, not understanding how such a thing could occur now, at the end of such a happy fête... Steps were heard as though... as though there were many of them. How many could they be? In the silence of the night snatches could be heard ringing loud:

Arise, ye pris'ners of starvation

. . . . . .

A better world's in birth

. . . . . .

Arise, ye slaves, no more in thrall

. . . . . .

The sky was grey like a huge bottle wiped with a duster; to the east only a yellowish ray of light shone timidly.

Far away, towards the quarter where the factory stands, three shots were heard clearly.

The song died away...

"But it's *The Internationale!* " whispered Velceanu; "really and truly, *The Internationale!*"

CHAPTER XIII

Through the misty air of the September morning a plaintive whizzing, fluttering sound floated for a moment, then the ground rang as though with the bang of a steel hammer. The walls of the house shook and in the stony silence that followed the clear sound of the vibrating windows could be heard. Dizzy with sleep, Andrei sat up in bed and listened attentively. Beside him Dan was sleeping; he was perspiring and his hair hung limp round his head. Andrei sank back into the pillow. He knew he would not be able to fall asleep again. 'What time is it?' he wondered. 'Four? Five?' He tried to relax, to surrender to the calm torpor that brought on sleep. For three weeks the moment of waking as well as the quarter of an hour after going to bed in the evening no longer frightened him. It was peace time again,

the war was over, life could begin anew. Sometimes he could hardly believe it was true; he looked around, trying to discover something new in people's countenances, something akin to his own joy. Twenty days ago, they had all stood in front of the wireless set that announced the liberation of Paris. They listened sullenly, tortured by anxiety. Everyone was thinking: 'but what will become of us'? The same night, the notary public Meliuță, drunk with joy, had knocked at their window:

"Peace! For God's sake get up! Peace! Peace has been signed."

And after him, about half an hour later, while Andrei was turning the switch of the radio set, trying to find a confirmation among the crackling noises, songs and speeches that were crossing one another in the air, Scarlat had rushed into the house, his hair all ruffled, in his night-shirt over which he had donned a military tunic:

"I cry in a loud voice and say: 'The great Babylon has fallen. Peace!' "

Interspersed with Bible quotations, they learnt from Scarlat that every hour Radio-Donau abused the treacherous Rumanians, announcing that the Russians were nearing Galatz and that:

"The hour has come when the righteous can proclaim their righteousness, for the great whore hath let fall the cup full of her abominations and filthiness of her fornication."

That morning Andrei ran to Ardeleanu's house but he was not in. His widowed landlady told him he had gone to the mayor's office where the peasants had gathered. Andrei went there too. In the courtyard of the mayor's office, in the yard of Meliuță's house, the men were waiting for the notary public. The latter came out every ten minutes to tell them the latest news. Gociman, the sergeant-major, was drunk and offered cigarettes to the people, patting them on the shoulder in a friendly way. Finally, Andrei discovered Ardeleanu in a corner, sitting on a pile of wood, surrounded by the men. He was laughing and trying to answer their questions. When he saw Andrei, he rose and came to meet him. He shook his hand vigorously and did not say a word, but his eyes were shining.

"I'm just going to town to get in touch with the Party," he said and, seeing how puzzled Andrei looked, he began to laugh. "Yes, yes, the Party..."

The days that followed were full of anxiety. No one knew what was happening. Every day the notary or Father Scarlat brought some new rumour, picked up God only knew wherefrom: the Germans have wiped out Bucharest from the face of the earth; the king was dead; Hitler had dropped a bomb which wiped out the whole British Isle; the town was full of communists armed to the teeth; a million Janapese had arrived at Curtici and were butchering everybody.

By the en dof August, Turculeţ, the station-master, sent Liviuţa to the village together with her piano. From her they heard that Rumanian regiments had started for the frontier, that the day before a Hungarian aeroplane had flown very low, just above the bridge over the river Criş... Andrei's mother was very worried, for Emilia had gone to town and she had no word from her.

Andrei was overcome by unusual restlessness. He would have liked to *do* something and did not know what. That was the reason why he was impatiently looking forward to Ardeleanu's return. He was surprised how the village had changed in those few days. People's countenances expressed impatience and confidence. One day he met Sofron, the mayor, who came up to him, took off his black hat and holding out his hand, said:

"I hope, you are no longer angry with me, Master Andrei. We who eat the State's bread... we had to do what the State ordered and that is what we shall have to do now. We're too unimportant to try to fight the State."

Andrei could say nothing. He was vexed but every time someone humbled himself before him, he felt helpless, disarmed.

Father Ioja was the most worried man in the village. He had shaved off his beard lest the Russians catch him with it, and all day long, from morning till late at night, together with his wife and his son Luţu he dug holes in his courtyard. They hid away their cereals and the valuable things they had in the house. Once, when he met Andrei, he said exasperated:

"You were wiser than all of us. Bravo! Congratulations..." And seeing how surprised Andrei looked, he smiled a wry smile. "Yes, yes. Do you think I haven't heard you were expelled from school for Communism? Oh, hard times are in store for us..."

The same day, a German plane appeared over the village flying very low. It dropped a shower of leaflets which the peasants collected painstakingly. It spoke of the misfortune that would overtake treacherous Rumania, of the secret weapons that would punish the cowards. Greatly perturbed, Meliuță went from house to house and collected the leaflets, threatening everybody with the shooting squad. He managed to collect five kilograms of paper. He numbered every leaflet, tied the parcel with cord and asked the district council what to do with them. He was told, in an irritated tone, that he could use them in the privy. The notary was so frightened that he did not sleep for a whole week. He finally set fire to them in the courtyard, in the presence of the communal council.

Ardeleanu returned only a week later. His neighbours who looked upon him as a serious man whose word they could trust, congregated at his house, anxious to hear what was being said and what was going on in town, in the whole country and in the whole world.

The next day the whole village knew that the mechanic had been a communist for a long time and that some time ago, when the police had been after him, he had taken refuge at Papp's mill. He had spoken to the people the whole night, telling them lots of things about Soviet Russia. His words spread as oil spreads on a thin cloth.

At the pub, Gociman whispered to Father Scarlat:

"Oh, my, why did I not find him out before, I'd have flayed him alive. I told Mr. Meliuță: I don't like the look of him. I don't. But he would not hear of it, said he was a decent fellow..."

He heaved his rifle onto his back and went to Ardeleanu's. All smiles, he asked him if he had an authorization to carry on political activity and, when Ardeleanu handed him a paper, he stared at it for a while. He did not understand what it was, but saw a stamp with the sickle and the hammer.

"But is it an authorization from the State?"

"The Communist Party is a legal party, Sergeant-major."

"Hm... yes... and what do you want to do?"

"Propaganda, Sergeant-major."

Gociman had not the strength to say a word. The veins of his forehead had swollen. Ardeleanu looked at him calmly, and the gendarme saw in his eyes that he was laughing at him.

"I'll call again and see what sort of... propaganda yours can be."

"Alright, come any time."

When Andrei went to Ardeleanu's place, he found him busy writing something. Andrei looked at him reproachfully.

"Why didn't you tell me anything?"

"It was better so," said Ardeleanu with a smile. "Look, I've brought some newspapers."

Andrei read them curiously but found mothing particular in them. The "Tribuna Romînă" had changed its title and, becoming "democratic," was thundering violently against the "Huns," our old enemies. The tone of the articles betrayed an embarrassment caused by the sudden change and the editor's groping efforts in trying to maintain an imaginary moderate position.

Andrei shrugged his shoulders. Then Ardeleanu handed him two roneographed pages. The title "The Patriot" was in thick black letters, and above it were the sickle and the hammer.

"This is ours," said Ardeleanu, proudly. "The comrades are moving heaven and earth to print it. There's no paper... no printing-machine. It's printed in the old illegal printing-shop." He wouldn't let Andrei read it; he took him by the hand and said solemnly: "Listen, we've got work to do now."

"What sort of work?"

"A lot of work. Some are afraid of the word 'communist' as of the very devil. They're not used to it and they don't know what's going on in the country. We must show the people that the Russians are coming here as friends."

He told him what had happened in town. Armed workers had set the jailed communists free; notorious fascists had gone into hiding; preparations were being made

for the reception of the Red Army. There had been scuffles at the frontier, with the Hungarian frontier guards...

Aunt Emilia was overjoyed. If George was a prisoner, he would return. She left for the town, hoping to hear something about him. At night, Meliuță the notary public came to them, looking worried. He had heard the news that at the frontier there were great troop movements and there was no more than eight miles to the frontier.

Andrei sighed, tossing about in bed; at that moment, from very far away came a faint crackling noise, then a few straggling shots. He gripped Dan by the shoulder:

"D'you hear?"

"What's the matter?" said his cousin bristling up. "Are you mad? Let's sleep."

Disarmed by his indifference, Andrei closed his eyes and fell sound asleep.

When his mother pulled the blanket off, Andrei jumped out of bed. He saw it was broad daylight. The sunshine was streaming in through the window together with a diffuse, persistent noise: voices of people shouting, cracking of whips, mowing of cows, sheep-bells, tinkling, creaking of cartwheels and in the distance the continual rumble of machine-guns. At times, a thick dry grunt, like a stifled bellowing, could be heard.

"The Hungarians are coming!" cried his mother, and the next moment Andrei was wide awake. Ana was as pale as chalk; her hands were trembling and she was looking around in bewilderment. She spoke breathlessly:

"The village is full of refugees. People are fleeing, leaving their houses. This morning at three the Germans attacked the frontier. The colony at Ciumeghiu is on fire. What are we going to do, Andrei?"

Andrei started to dress hurriedly. He could hardly find the buttons of his shirt. Dan had got up too and was peevishly feeling for his slippers with his bare feet. Ana was wringing her hands:

"Hurry and get up. We must also do something."

She opened the window and the deafening din of the street filled the room. The road full of stir and bustle was wrapped in a cloud of dust; along all the lanes, coming

from the West, a stream of waggons was passing, waggons loaded with cases, pillows, bedsteads, chairs, icons, cupboards and large bundles. Among the snorting horses, whipped till they bled, big Transylvanian oxen with long horns, and sheep were advancing placidly. Dogs barking wildly were tugging at the chain that tied them to the staff side, children perched on top of the luggage were shrieking terrified.

"What are we to do, Andrei?" Ana cried wringing her hands. "Oh, if Emilia had only been at home!" She started weeping and crushing her apron: "For God's sake, say something."

"I don't know anything. What can I say?" cried Andrei. "Wait till we see what it is all about."

He rushed out with one of his sandals still unfastened. In the kitchen, his grandmother was sitting at the table sipping at intervals from a mug of milk in which she had soaked large bits of bread. Andrei went up to her as though expecting some advice from her.

"Hard times have come, granny's own little boy," she whispered. "You see, war has come upon us too."

"What are we to do, granny?

"What God wills..."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"My goodness, how can you speak like that, Mother Ana?" came a thick voice from near the oven. It was Laboș who had sat down on a small stool there. "Lo, it's the end of the world, that's what it is... Teodor said that..."

"And do you believe what he says?" said the old woman smiling contemptuously and pursing her lips." He's certainly filled his pants..."

"Yes," assented Laboș. "He won't leave us alone. Says we ought to hurry up and leave, for they're savages and kill the babies in their mothers' bellies. As for him, a priest, they'll hang him from the tall tethering-pole in the cattle-pen. Catița hangs on to him, yelling that she won't be left behind and be raped by whole regiments. What am I to do? My God, what am I to do..." Then, brightening up, he rose to his feet, tall, strong and red-faced, perspiring with fear and confusion. "All the village is leaving:

Picu has just loaded his waggon, and Hristea, and Bituşiţă, Grozuţă, if you remember him, Mother Ana, and Creiţar... They've all gone to the breeding-stud to get their horses and many are harnessing..."

Then suddenly Laboş lifted his short swollen arms to the smoky ceiling and cried: "What am I to do? How can I go and leave all I have? I know what war is... I was in Italy in 1914. They'll burn and destroy everything..."

"Laboş, you were never a real man," said the old woman, pouring out another mug of milk for herself.

Andrei could not listen to them any more and went out. The school grounds, deserted but carefully swept, shone under the merciless glare of a hot, oppressive autumn sun. He ran across it, opened the gate, and went out into the lane. All along it, as far as the end of the village, there was nothing but the line of waggons driving full speed towards the bridge. They were loaded so full that at the rate they were driving, it was a wonder they did not upset. Across the road, from Albu's house, a heavy waggon, as tall as a hay-stack, burst forth through the open gate. The black fiery horses made room for themselves among the others, and Albu, a man as thin as a lath and green in the face with fear, began to roar:

"Hurry up, damn you! Hurry up." And turning to his wife who was weeping with her hands before her eyes, cracked his whip above her head, saying: "Shut up, or I'll break your shins. Hurry up, the enemy'll soon be here..."

Andrei went up to a man who was walking alongside his waggon and catching him by the sleeve asked:

"What's happened uncle?"

"Why, young man," said the peasant turning round, "the enemies are coming. Gee! Ho!" he cried to his oxen.

Andrei, perplexed, walked beside him, firing questions at him.

"Yes... but how? What's happened?"

"Why, I belong to the colony," said the man hurriedly and at the same time willing to speak. "We'd heard that patrols had been crossing the frontier. This morning a bomb was suddenly dropped right in the middle of the lane on Tuplas's house. It was simply wiped out. Both

his legs were cut off and his wife was killed. Then the firing began. The bullets flew past with a noise like the chirping of crickets... The whole colony took to their heels. We've gathered the little we have and we're going..."

"Where to?" asked Andrei.

"Anywhere. Now the Russians aren't far away and we'll turn back home after them. It's said that the Hungarians take all the men who're over fourteen into the army."

"How do you know?" asked Andrei grasping his arm.

"Come on, Petre, let's get on. Don't stop to talk, Petre!" cried the woman on top of the waggon. "Let them do whatever they think best. Gee! Wo!"

The choking dust made Andrei cough painfully. The air was burning hot, unbearable. With a jerk, the stream of waggons stopped. An over-loaded cart had capsized in the ditch, scattering about all its contents. The screams of a woman were heard followed by the dreadful oaths of those prevented from going on. The other half of the stream of waggons gained ground.

"Speak, man!" Andrei begged still pulling him by the sleeve.

"How can I tell? That's what they did in northern Transylvania... They sent them all to the front... My advice is, don't wait. Our poor frontier guards won't resist longer than noon... They've no bullets and the others come with tanks. This morning I saw the wounded, poor souls, children in the prime of life, all cut up... Gee!" he roared seeing the crowd had started to move again.

Andrei was left standing in the road, not knowing what to do. He was thinking: 'If I were taken to the front, in the German army. That would be the last straw.'

He set out, not knowing why, and walked towards the end of the village. When he passed by Laboș's house, he heard Scarlat's mad shrieks:

"Hurry, Caterina. Hurry, my dear! Leave everything! We don't need clothes. Hurry up, I tell you."

Andrei opened the gate and went in. Scarlat in uniform — he had taken off the epaulets — was trying to harness the horses to the waggon, but Laboș's stallion was biting and kicking, so he dared not go near him. When he caught

sight of Andrei, he rushed up to him and waving his arms roared:

"What are you people doing? Aren't you leaving? Come along too, the barbarians, the Huns, the Vandals are coming. I'm not staying ... I'm an officer, they'll butcher me! Caterina, try and harness this horse. Hurry up, dear..."

His wife, wrapped in a large, grey dressing-gown which kept opening in front showing her thick legs, ran continually from the house to the waggon and back again, carrying jars of cucumbers, bottles of tomato sauce, dirty slips, one of Laboș's fur-lined coats, which she threw pell-mell into the wagon. The stallion, left free, snorted, swelling his pink nostrils.

"Harness him," cried Scarlat gesticulating wildly. He had forgotten to button his trousers and they kept falling down.

"Andrei, for God's sake, do not stay on here. We'll make room for you in the waggon. We'll take your people too. We've no room for luggage." Then remembering something he turned round and, not seeing Caterina, he roared: "I say dearie! Run up to the garret and take a few copies of my book. The Huns will set fire to them. D'ye hear?"

Andrei was stamping with impatience. He begged Scarlat:

"I know you've got field-glasses. Give them to me, please."

"What do you want them for?"

"I'll go up in the church steeple, I may be able to see something."

"Are you mad? They'll see the glitter of the lenses and think it's an artillery observation post. You'll be sighted in the twinkling of an eye and they'll do you in. I've got experience..."

"Give me the glasses, man." Andrei said harshly, losing his temper.

Scarlat was scared; he ran into the house and brought them.

"Here they are. I don't need such military implements. Andrei, hurry up and make up your mind. Are you coming with us? Father has got another waggon but

he'll certainly overload it. But we'll take you and your people along."

Andrei was no longer listening to him; he rushed out of the courtyard. Around him a cloud of dust had swallowed everything up. He set out for the church and on the way he met Lădoi. The latter, his shirt open down to his navel, was running wildly, bare-headed. When he saw Andrei, he called, running past him:

"Don't stay, run away too. We're almost ready."

Andrei ran till he reached the church, crossed the courtyard overgrown with tall, lush grass and, pushing the door open with his shoulder, went in. It was cool inside and there was a close smell of incense and candle smoke. In the dark, the clumsily painted figures of the saints seemed to rise from an autumn mist floating above a pond. Andrei ran up the creaking staircase leading to the garret, between the fifty-year-old, moth-eaten banners left lying there. In the garret, a few bats were asleep hanging from the beams. There was a musty smell of old things and dead bodies. He clambered with great difficulty on to a big half-rotten case, pushed open the shutter, and bent out. From here, so high up, the bustle of the village seemed dazzling. From the grey skirts of the forest, a trail of waggons crept like a snake along the white, dry road wrapped in a mist of dust. Andrei adapted the lenses of his field glasses and looked towards the west. At first, he saw nothing but the green line of the horizon, interrupted here and there by the dwarfed line of the trunks of the trees, by the metallic glitter of the Criș, the iron web of the railway bridge and the red tower of Zerind. Suddenly, in the ocular there appeared a white stain, like a cotton ball bursting unexpectedly, then a black gush of earth rose and fell. The shot resounded, sharp and full. Andrei distinguished the thin strips of smoke from the shots and once he thought he saw some creatures that looked like black ants, run, fall, rise, lie down, leaving now and again a ruddy mark and a thin train of smoke behind them. The sky was dazzlingly clear, and it seemed incredible that there, far away, people were dying.

Andrei withdrew, covering himself with dust and cobwebs, and sat down on the case, his head buried in his

hands. What should he do now? Should he leave? But where to? And especially with what? If, at least, his father were here. The people in the village were fond of him (several times at Easter he had sung the "Apostle" in church). Father would certainly have immediately found a way, or in any case he could have taken a decision. Even if he, Andrei, had been alone, he would not have minded so much.

He came down and went out of the church. Although he did his best to fight against it, the fear inspired by the crowd fleeing wildly was overcoming him more and more. He started at a run for home, but he had not gone ten steps when, from a wagon, came a piercing shriek:

"The planes!"

Andrei flung himself down under a fence, his face in his hands. He heard clearly the neighing of horses, the creaking of wagons, then the noise of something falling. He looked up: the wagons, pushed from behind, were rolling one after the other into the ditch; for a moment he saw a woman floating in the air, her skirts whirling, then she plashed into the grimy, muddy, greenish water and began to scream.

A grey plane, the edge of its wings painted yellow, swooped down, bending th eboughs of the mulberry-trees, and vanished beyond the hillock. Andrei rose and ran towards his house. When he reached the school, he saw the gate wide-open and two wagons standing in the yard. Turculeţ, in his shirt-sleeves, was running in and out of the house, followed by Liviuţa and by Andrei's mother. They were loading clothes, the radio set, loaves, hams and flitches of bacon. When she saw her son, Ana ran towards him, sobbing aloud:

"Where have you been, Andrei? Where have you been?" Then laughing nervously through her tears: "Mr. Turculeţ has been so kind to take us along with him. He's come from the station with two wagons. We can't stay here, dear, we can't... I've heard the Germans take everybody away..."

"Quite," said Turculeţ smiling foolishly and, coming towards Andrei, holding out his hand. "Yes, Mr. Andrei, you see what we've come to. It's a bitter cup. But the Soviet troops will soon be here. I heard it over the radio yesterday,

the forces of the First Ukrainian Front have entered Bucharest.

Very smartly dressed in a check skirt, Liviuța came near him and simpered into his ear:

"We're leaving together, Andrei. Oh, isn't it wonderful?"

Andrei shrugged his shoulders.

"Where's Dan?" he asked his mother.

"In the garret... You see... he's hiding the corn in that hiding-place behind the chimney. Andrei, granny won't come. Speak to her, please."

And away she ran again, to bring something else out.

Andrei went up to the garret. Dan stripped to the waist, the perspiration streaming down his breast in black streaks, was carrying bags of corn which he then contemptuously flung into the hiding place.

"It's an idea of auntie's," he said, spitting angrily. "As if anything could be saved, if the house is burnt down."

Andrei helped him, and in half an hour they had hidden all the bags. The dry and stifling heat in the garret was unbearable. They both sat down on a beam and lit a cigarette.

"Grannie 's terrible," said Dan. "She won't leave. She says she won't flee before the enemy. She won't let them destroy all we have... What do you think of that?"

"Who knows? Maybe she 's right..."

"Would you like to stay too?"

"Maybe..."

"What the devil do you mean by such nonsense? I must hurry. We're leaving in about an hour. I'm taking a few books for the way. I'm off."

Andrei envied him his composure. He rose too and, remembering something, went near the hiding place behind the chimney; he lay down on his belly and crept into it, knocking his head against a beam. He pushed some of the bags aside and got as far as the eaves, where he fumbled in the dark and found the parcel he was looking for. He came out, crawling backwards, and coming to the light opened the parcel and produced a revolver and two charges. His uncle Palli had brought them from the front. The revolver was oiled and Andrei wiped it with his handkerchief, loaded it, and drawing the safety-bolt slipped it into the hip pocket of his trousers.

In the yard everything was ready; Mr. Turculeț had already taken his seat on the box of one of the waggons beside his brother-in-law, a young peasant dressed in his Sunday best. Old Ana stood in the doorway of the kitchen, her hand sheltering her eyes while her daughter was begging her to come along with them. But the old woman did not seem to hear them. She had raised her shoulders and her furrowed shrunken face expressed so much courage and determination that Andrei was moved.

"You can go... How could I leave the house? What would Emilia say when she returned? If they kill me, it won't matter, I haven't long to live as it is... Go, and may God grant we meet again."

She held out her long, dry hand and stroked Andrei's face.

"Take care of them all. You're a man now."

"Granny..."

"Don't worry. I've put the big hatchet behind the door. If any one dare come in, I'll smash his head as I would a dog's. Go now..."

Her face was like stone.

"My dear lady," said Turculeț courteously," I think we ought to hurry. I don't know how long the frontier guards can resist. I think the shots are getting nearer."

Ana flung herself into her mother's arms, sobbing. The old woman hugged her solemnly to her hollow breast, then kissed her grandsons and made the sign of the cross over them.

"God be with you, my darlings, God be with you."

"Mother," said Ana sobbing.

But the old woman frowned.

"Go now! What are you waiting for?"

"Come, Andrei," called Liviuța.

Dan had climbed up next to her and stretched himself out confortably on one side.

Andrei called out:

"Go on, and I'll catch you up. I must dress. Don't you see I'm in tatters?"

"Andrei," said his mother crossly, "that's just like your father. Hurry up. I've laid out your clothes in the bedroom."

"We're taking the road to Şupreuş," said Turculeţ. He took the whip in his left hand and with his right made a large sign of the cross.

Andrei went inside. On a chair his mother had laid out his best clothes, a check woollen coat, grey trousers, heavy double-soled shoes and a white silk shirt. Andrei noticed that Ana had forgotten on the table a thin gold chain, his wrist-watch, Emilia's ear-rings and a silver brooch. "Poor mother," he said, thrusting them into his pocket, "she was beside herself."

He walked through all the rooms; everything topsy-turvy, the mattresses were on the floor, the pillows lying about everywhere. He kissed the old woman once again and set off. His new shoes pinched and as the thick soling would not bend, he walked with difficulty. The colonists had all passed and the line of waggons consisted now only of people from Lunca.

Some men called out to Andrei and he answered, waving his hand. The shots were heard very clearly now. Turning into the lane that led to Şupreuş he saw Turculeţ's two waggons, and his mother, her face in her hands. Liviuţa motioned to him but he took no notice of her.

"Andrei," some one called, and when he turned round he saw Ardeleanu. He ran to him and gripped him by the sleeve:

"What are we to do? What should we do?"

The mechanic shrugged his shoulders.

"We're leaving... The Russians aren't far. Very soon..."

"Come with us," said Andrei quickly.

"I can't . I must hide the Diesel. We won't leave them anything. Go on, I'll catch up with you. You're going towards Şupreuş, aren't you?"

"Yes."

The village was panic-stricken: the gates were wide open and there was a dreadful bustle everywhere. Cats, dogs, goats were jumping about between people's legs; through the wide-open doors, pillows, blankets, big earthen jars full of plum marmelade were being flung out. Towards the end of the village, Tulea, the joiner, was pulling out the window frames of his home and loading a wagon with them: other men had taken even the planks of their fences,

barrel staves, the bucket from the well, hens tied together, geese making a deafening noise.

An hour later the village was far behind, hidden among the green plum-tree orchards, and the shots at the frontier could hardly be heard. Andrei was trying not to lose sight of his people's wagon. The strong, persistent feeling of uneasiness he had had during the first hours of the day had gone; instead he felt a strong determination: 'They must not catch us. All this cannot last long; the Russians are not far away.'

He heard a loud rumbling noise: a wagon came out of the road and started across the fields; he recognized Father Scarlat, his hair waving in the wind, his mouth wide open, whipping up the shiny back of the stallion. Caterina, next to him, could hardly sit on the box and was hanging on to his arm. Scarlat however was yelling and slashing out with his whip mercilessly.

"Quicker! Quicker!" he cried to Andrei, waving to him with his other hand.

Walking faster, Andrei caught up with Turculeţ's wagon and leapt into it, as it rolled along.

"Aren't you hungry?" asked his mother, and he burst into laughter. How could he think of eating now?

"That's exactly like Octavian," she admitted resigned. "You can't go anywhere with him. I remember once when he got off the train in a station to talk to some friends. He had the tickets and ..." She broke off. Rocked by the movement of the wagon, Dan had fallen asleep.

Towards noon Ardeleanu caught up with them. He was trudging heavily along the side of the road, a small bundle on his back. Andrei was glad to see him; he jumped down and walked beside him:

"How long will it take the Russians to be here?"

"A week..."

Ardeleanu bent his head. On his frowning brow drops of perspiration were running. He was kicking the ground as he walked, as though to let off his rage. It was hot. In front, as far as the eye could reach, you only saw the horns of the oxen, the wet backs of the horses, the tall wagons with women perched on their tops and a cloud of reddish

dust, pungent and warm, floating in waves above the columns of wagons.

The village they entered about two o'clock was all astir. Gates open, wagons driving at full speed, a crowd of people in commotion, gathering around some man who could shout louder than the rest, and everywhere the stirred up dust floated in the air, unable to settle. Turculeț's wagon stopped at the post office and he went in. He failed to get any information but managed to buy a big can of milk from the postman who lived nearby. In the meantime, Ana was counting the luggage, constantly making mistakes. Dan had lain down in the shade of a mulberry-tree, reading, while Liviuța, dejected, had sat down near him in the dusty grass encircling her knees with her arms.

Turculeț had run right and left and returned with a bottle of wine. But, under his smiling mask, Andrei guessed, he continued to be just as scared. Turculeț did his utmost to conceal his terror, for fear of frightening Liviuța.

They sat down on the grass to have something to eat, but none of them managed to swallow a bite. Although Andrei was starving, the bread and bacon would not go down his throat. He had smoked all the time and his palate was as dry as tinder. The energy of the line of wagons had slackened, but the fear they roused in Șupreuș stimulated them again. Presently, the wagons drove off, urged by the shrieks of Grozuță, the chanter of Lunca.

"Oh, dear me. My bairns! My wife! Hurry up, I've heard the enemies have reached Adea!"

Turculeț let his brother-in-law drive the wagon the women and Dan had climbed into, and went on alone through the village, hoping to get some news; Andrei followed him, although his mother had begged him in a trembling voice to remain with her. In front of the church, Gociman, the gendarmerie sergeant-major of Lunca, dead drunk, his unbuttoned tunic stained with grease, was waving his rifle and shouting:

"Why, are we going to give in? I won't budge one step from here. I shall show them how things stand, damn their souls!"

"And what do you mean to do?" asked some lads that were accompanying him.

"I? Listen to me, and learn... D'you see that anti-tank barricade?"

"Yes," said one of the lads turning towards a screen made of interwoven branches and stakes, standing right in the middle of the road, with only one very narrow opening, just broad enough to allow one wagon to pass.

"Hey! I'll climb up to the church garret and, as soon as they come, I'll shoot them," said Gociman, dashing his worn cap to the ground.

The frantic race of the morning had calmed down a bit; now the wagons were driving slower as though for a long journey. They passed through fields of almost ripe maize, and the light, metallic rustle of the leaves was unutterably sad, like soft weeping, while the darker trees along the road looked like apparitions. Far away, to the west, the roar of cannons was heard, like the beating of an enormous drum in the bowels of the earth. Someone cried:

"Adea's on fire!"

The questions crossed one another.

"Where?"

"Where?"

"Look. There."

"Adea's on fire!"

"My bairns! My wife!" the desperate voice of the chanter was heard shouting. "Hurry! Get on!"

To the east, in the vast darkness of the evening, a yellow flame was shining. It seemed as though, nearby some one had lit a match. Through his field-glasses Andrei saw the big flames in the midst of which stood out the black walls of the houses, the church tower licked by a blood-red blaze. With the naked eye one could see only an intense patch of light, growing larger and larger, becoming darker, almost purple because of the smoke.

The horses were pulling with all their strength, one could hear how hard they were breathing. Turculeț's brother-in-law said:

"We must halt somewhere. The horses need a rest."

High above, the impassive sky, slightly faded by the approaching autumn, rose like a vault. Even the wind stealing lightly through the maize was different, prophesying, as it were, rain, mud and the sullen grey of the months to

come. Andrei stood gazing for a long while at the moving blaze of the burning village and shuddered: now, it was a compact block of flames and around it the sky had taken on a strange orange-greenish colour. Along the roadside one could see the white patches of the wagons, standing still, and hear the gentle chewing of the beasts that had entered the maize field. No fire had been kindled as yet, and the people were talking in whispers, not daring to disturb the oppressive silence of the night, so that the wind seemed to be bringing to them the distant cracking noise of the houses on fire. Nestling to Mrs. Turculeț 's big soft breast, Liviuța was weeping. Ana whispered to Andrei:

"Be nice to her."

Andrei jumped down from the cart and almost collided with a man who, muttering an oath, recognized him, shook him by the hand, saying:

"Is that you, Master Andrei? It's me, Cloambeș... I kiss your hand, ma'am. We're here too... not far... Oh, the poor people of Șupreuș!" he giggled shrilly. "All their maize is going to pot now."

From all sides came the crunching of the thick stalks, chewn by the jaws of the beasts, mingling with the whispers and wails of a woman somewhere, nearby; the clanging of the chain which some ox was shaking with its horns, the creaking of an axle or the gurgling of a bottle were the only noises of the crowd, no longer in motion.

"Where are you going, Andrei?" Liviuța asked.

He did not answer.

Trying hard to avoid treading on the bodies lying in the ditch, Andrei walked down the road. He could hear:

"My God, what else is in store for us?"

"And if they catch us..."

"Hush, or you'll bring misfortune on us..."

"Dear me! Dear me! I've forgotten to take the pig out of the sty... My goodness, me."

"If you're a fool, woman!"

"They say the Russians aren't far away."

"Oh, God! I wish they would come and let us get back to our houses."

Andrei found Ardeleanu on the edge of the ditch, his forehead buried in his hands.

He sat down beside him silently. His feet ached.

"We're fleeing like sheep," said Ardeleanu, angrily. He spat out the cigarette-end that was burning his lips. "The vileness of some people in this country is disgusting. 'They' knew very well the Germans would attack us. They knew it, and did nothing to prevent it. If, at least, they'd given us civilians weapons? Now, we've nothing to fight with."

Dead tired, Andrei closed his eyes; he suddenly started. Far away, a cannon had roared... "If all this crowd of fleeing people had been armed... Men, women... He was filled somehow with a feeling of shame."

"It cannot last long," he muttered to himself.

"We shall still resist, somewhere," said Ardeleanu. "If, at least, we were there."

After a while, Andrei said:

"We'll go as far... And if need be..." He clenched his fists.

Ardeleanu rose to his feet.

"Let's go to your wagon. We'd better stay together."

Andrei's mother was glad when she heard the mechanic was coming with them.

"What do you think — she asked — when will the Russians be here?"

"In a week's time at most."

"God grant it!"

Ardeleanu smiled broadly.

"Nothing can stop them."

Turculeț had laid blankets and quilts on the ground and was advising everybody to lie down and get some sleep, for they would have a long way to go the next day. Liviuța was weeping.

The men lay down in the wagon. Dan kept grumbling because he could not make himself comfortable. Then he too was silent. Andrei covered himself as well as he could with a bed-sheet. He seemed to feel the blood coursing through his veins throbbing violently. He heaved a sigh.

He did not know how long he had slept, when a deafening metallic noise, an unbearable rattle roused him. He thought he was jumping out of bed, and his hip hit against the corner of a case, and the next moment something rushed out from

the surrounding darkness, howling. The wagon capsized in the ditch, Andrei's forehead struck a clod of earth and he felt a sharp pain between his eyes, then someone gripped him by the shoulder, and he heard Ardeleanu's voice shouting into his ear:

"The Germans."

He rose heavily. Ardeleanu caught him by the hand and dragged him along. They entered the maize-field blindly; the swaying stalks lashed them painfully over the face and chest. Behind them, they heard a few shots and a Very-light flashed out leaving a thin greenish trail behind.

Andrei stumbled. He felt as though his ankle would burst, and leaping like a hare ran on. Beside him he heard the cracking of the maize stalks broken by Ardeleanu and his stertorous breathing. Then all the noises died down. The only sound he still heard was the deafening beats of his temples, the throb of his blood. They went down a ravine, crossed a narrow stream, climbed a stony bank, crossed a stubble-field in whose soft ground their feet sank and entered a thorny thicket which caught at their clothes like claws. Andrei groaned:

"I can't go on..." and he sank down limply, leaning on his hand, his fingers grasping the cold earth. Around them, deep silence; at intervals, cannons echoed in the distance.

CHAPTER XIV

Vîslan was roused from his sleep by someone kicking the door and making it shake.

"Just a moment!" he cried angrily, looking for his dressing gown, but the noise went on, causing him to lose his head.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," he called out shrilly, but all in vain. He realized that the knocking had stopped, but the windows and walls went on making the same noise. Losing one of his slippers, he rushed to the door, opened it and saw Şendrea, his face distorted, wearing a thick coat, a fur-cap on his head, panting under the weight of two large travelling-bags bound with shaggy cord.

"The Germans and the Hungarians are attacking us," roared the secretary. "People are running away. Don't you hear the cannons in the Citadel ? Run ! Run, while there's time. The last trains are leaving for Lugoj. Good luck!"

He snatched up his luggage and rolled down the stairs, tripping over the skirts of his too long coat, while Vîslan perplexed, was leaning against the bannister, and waving to him gracefully. It was only when the entrance door was banged, that he realized the real meaning of Şendrea's words and rushed downstairs shuffling the only slipper he had on. The street was all astir; motor-cars with travelling-bags and cases attached with ropes at the back, carriages were driving madly to the station and people in winter clothes were pushing along prams, wheel-barrows, push-carts laden with all their belongings.

Vîslan leaned against the wall of the house.

Someone passing by collided against him and almost threw him down. When he recovered, Vîslan began to ask every passer-by:

"For God's sake, tell me, where are you going ? What's happened ? Tell me, for God's sake."

As no one troubled to answer, he dashed into the house, dressed hurriedly, fumbling with his buttons, and then started rummaging in search for some money. He remembered that the day before he had been on the spree and now he had no money whatever not even for cigarettes. Exhausted, his mind clogged with fear, he sat down on the carpet. Then he leapt to his feet. He felt his hair standing on end and realized that if he stayed there for another minute like that, all alone, in total ignorance of what was going on, he would go mad. He hastily collected the most important papers, the negatives taken at the reception at the prefecture and thrust them into his inside breast-pocket, snatched the rug off the bed, locked the door and darted down the stairs. 'I must get some money from somewhere, I simply must.'

Colliding with people coming from the other way, he ran to the centre of the town. He lost his hat but did not notice it. 'What a fool I've been,' he thought, 'what a downright ass. Now if the Germans come I'm done for. I'm as good as dead'. He had changed the newspaper's title into

"The Democratic Tribune". For the occupants this would certainly seem treason and he would be shot. He had not listened to Baron Papp's advice: "Wait a bit, my dear fellow, and see how things shape themselves: don't act rashly, these are decisive moments."

The panic in town almost sent him crazy. All over the place, people were running about blindly, the shops had their shutters drawn, soldiers with trailing rifles were racing towards the western outskirts of the town. When he tried to cross the street he was almost knocked down by an officer on horseback, who, bent over the horse's mane, was galloping, his sword dangling behind him like a metallic tail. Although Vîslan was running and his heart was beating fiercely, ready to burst out of his breast, he heard everywhere snatches of dialogues. (Everybody was shouting, unable to control themselves):

"The train for Pîncota leaves at a quarter to twelve."

"No. Better to Timişoara! There's a strong garrison there and from Yugoslavia they certainly won't come..."

"Please, sir. Please, won't you lend me or sell me a seat in your lorry?"

"I'm not leaving."

"Sell me your lorry."

"We'll go on foot, as far as Ineu."

"The Japanese are coming. A million Japanese."

"Where are the Russians? Where are the Russians?"

"They entered Bucharest yesterday..."

"It'll take them at the most six or seven days, to get here."

"But aren't our men resisting?"

"General Grinteş's a traitor. He's ordered the regiments to withdraw from the frontier."

"Run, here are the Stukas."

"The hooter. Why don't they sound the hooter?"

"Oh me! German parachutists have dropped at Gai."

Desperate, as though swimming in the midst of the crowd Vîslan was trying to elbow his way forward. His green, checked rug had come undone and he was trailing it behind him on the asphalt. Some one trod on it. Vîslan pulled as hard as he could, and he heard a heavy body fall, then a terrible oath. He threw away the rug and standing aside, tried to recover his breath. Varga! Yes, that was his only chance.

To ask Varga to give him some money. He wouldn't let him starve by the roadside! In return, he was willing to sell him the negative taken at the prefect's reception and tell him all he knew. One can't trifle with the Germans: he had abused them so terribly these last twenty days. Those Teutonic vipers, who had plundered the country, those hyenas who had dragged us into war against Russia! He had delivered a speech at the "Palace of Culture" in which, with the help of statistics drawn up for the purpose, he had proved how our oil-fields had been drained.

He had to wait almost a quarter of an hour before he could cross the boulevard. Every five minutes, a military lorry or cavalry squadron would go past, pushing the crowd aside. He finally reached Varga's house, just as the gate was being opened, and a grey roadster flew out like lightning. Vîslan had barely the time to see Varga's livid face and the car was lost in the stream along the boulevard. He ran after it, roaring as loud as he could, while tears were streaming down his eyes.

"Mr. Varga...! Mr. Vargaaa..."!

A soldier running at full speed collided with him, and they both nearly fell down.

"Idiot!" cried the soldier and Vîslan swallowed the insult, submissively. He drew back and leaning against the wall, closed his eyes. Mustering all his strength, he dashed into a call-box, but the queue there was immense: two men were fighting each other with their walking-sticks, while a smartly dressed woman with a black eye was trying to separate them.

Vîslan set out again. From head to foot he was soaking with hot, sticky sweat. He did not know how long it took him to reach Robber's house, but there he learnt that Jacquot had left half an hour before. Vîslan buried his face in his hands and sobbed like a child.

The man who had informed him was sorry for him; he laid his hand on his shoulder, trying to comfort him. He thought he was some relation of Robber's.

"Do not be afraid. They've escaped. You must understand they had to leave. Should the Germans catch them, now especially... Do not worry, they're out of danger."

"Damn them!" roared Vîslan, trying to take to his heels again. Where to? He did not know. He felt he could not go a step further. Turning into a small street, he found himself right in front of a cannon, the barrel of which was rising threateningly.

"Run, you blockhead!" a sergeant-major rapped out, in alarm. "It's forbidden to come here."

The ground shook and Vîslan fell on one knee. He had gone deaf. He saw other people standing there open-mouthed, he felt the ground quaking under his feet, but could hear nothing. In the silence he remembered Suslănescu and set off again. His ears opened suddenly with a clap and the hubbub of the town rushed at him. At the Velceanu's he found Mrs. Mimi alone, her face wet with tears, biting a white, lace trimmed silk handkerchief. When she saw him she took him in her arms and whimpered:

"Mr. Vîslan, what are we going to do? What are we going to do? Aurel is at Timişoara and I don't know where Sandi is... he's so late... He left at seven to find a means of conveyance. Don't leave me, Mr. Vîslan," said Mimi hanging on to him, scratching his coat sleeve with her purple nails.

Vîslan threw himself into an arm-chair, exhausted.

"Mrs. Velceanu, could I have a glass of brandy? I feel I'm dying..."

"Just a minute, just a minute," said Mimi gladly running to fetch it. From the kitchen came the clink of a glass and her anxious questions:

"Why is Sandi so late? Can anything have happened to him?"

But when she brought in the glass, she did not find Vîslan. He had run to father Potra's who lived in the neighbourhood.

*

Varga kept sounding the horn. All the other motorists did the same, so that an unbearable bleating, like the sound of an air-raid alarm hooter floated above the stream of cars racing to the station. He had but one thought: to leave the town as soon as possible, reach the asphalt road and then drive on as fast as he could. When he left, he had

given Aunt Matilda who was hanging on to him, a slap on the face. She kept howling:

"Take me too, for God's sake don't leave me. They'll rape me!"

"It won't do you any harm!" Varga had said, pushing her away with his foot. Then quite beside himself, he shook her by the shoulders so violently that she moaned and stared at him with gaping mouth:

"You must stay here, you scare-crow! They won't touch you. Some one *must* stay at home. Don't open the door to anyone, d'ye hear?"

And while he jumped into the car he heard her long desperate howl:

"Salvaa-to-o-or."

Driving past the factory and compelled to slow down because of a carriage in front of him, Varga saw a crowd of armed workers. He turned to the left and stopped the car; he then jumped down, locked the door and entered the factory courtyard. He heard the powerful, sonorous voice of a man whom he did not know:

"You remember how we fought that the factory should not be dismantled! It's ours and they had no right to take it away. Now, comrades, we must dismantle it, because it is ours. We won't leave it to the fascists. The Red Army is not far. The Communist Party calls upon all patriots to..."

Varga was no longer listening. The Communist Party! Had he not told all of them that the communists would be a force? No one had listened to him. Baron Papp had seemed to have taken leave of his senses. Immediately after August 23, he had recovered from his illness as if by magic and had changed completely. He gave orders, like a commanding officer, and would allow no one to retort. Pordea, Guiașiu and Motzeanu followed him about like docile sheep; they were in fact so frightened and puzzled that they would have done whatever anyone with the least bit of authority would have ordered them to do. It was for the first time that Varga realized that the baron was no good at politics. In his foolish blindness, he refused to take into account the communists or the social-democrats whom he called "illegal gangs." In his house a very smart club for the younger members of the National-Peasant

Party had been opened. Everyday, Varga saw a lot of very well-dressed young men, some of them Lucian's schoolfellows, coming in and going out of it. That made him understand that the baron no longer trusted the older generation and was preparing a new guard for himself. He had even chanced to overhear a short speech of Papp's: the latter was talking to the young people about democracy, about the great dangers which he, an old man, had gone through in order to prepare, alongside the leading staff of the party, the splendid day of August 23. Disgusted, Varga had avoided calling on Papp. He realized that the general atmosphere was confident and joyful, and that the speeches on peace and liberty published every day in Vîslan's rag were nothing but a masquerade. The Russians had not arrived yet and an attack of the Germans and Hungarians was now expected at any moment. Therefore what happened on the morning of September 13, was no surprise to him.

He would have liked to see what Dărnescu meant to do now. In the last few days, he had begun to value him and to realize that his apparent rudeness concealed a very clever man and a keen politician. He entered his office without having previously sent in his name, and found the manager seated calmly reading a detective story.

Dărnescu told him he had not the slightest intention of running away, that it would be a crime to do so and the company would certainly call him to account if he did.

"Which company?" asked Varga not understanding.

"Don't you know?" replied Dărnescu with a thick laugh, polishing his eye-glasses with a piece of kid leather. Until the very last moment, the Americans had an interest in our shares. We camouflaged them as best we could. Didn't you notice anything? The bombardment was just child's play. They destroyed the station and "damaged" the factory. And then, you see, we resisted as much as we could. How do you like the way we fooled the Germans? We shifted, we misled them while you people were fussing about foolishly, and risking your lives into the bargain. I had my own information, which was far more exact than the government's, believe me."

And why aren't you leaving now?

"Don't be silly. When the Germans will retreat they will want to blow up the factory. There must be some one to stop them."

"And will you be the one to do it?" asked Varga, without being sarcastic. He expected anything and he was sure that when things cleared up, all sorts of unknown heroes would appear. "What would you do if you were in my place?" he added, waiting anxious and tense for Dărnescu's reply.

"I'd leave immediately!" Dărnescu replied coolly, looking aside. "You belong to those... I hope what I say won't hurt you — you belong to the sort of people who serve as façade, those who serve certain interests they know nothing at all about.

"I see. It's quite clear," said Varga trying to conceal his annoyance. Dărnescu was perfectly right.

"You know, the sort that gets sacrificed, when necessary. Orators, demagogues, in the good classical sense of the word. Demosthenes too, was a demagogue."

"Quite... Quite..."

"So that the best thing for you is to flee. Have you got a car?"

"Yes. It's at the gate."

"So," and Dărnescu rose, "I wish you good luck. I hope we'll meet again soon. My kind regards to Mrs. Varga."

And before Varga went out, he took up his book. At the door Varga stopped:

"By the way, do you know what's going on in the courtyard?"

"Why, of course. The patriotic guards are astir."

"And doesn't that annoy you?"

"On the contrary."

When he got to his car, Varga took fright of the crowd that had invaded the street. It was very hard work slipping his car in among the other cars. Foaming with rage, because of the pace he had to go at, he kept vainly sounding his horn, while his annoyance grew.

When he crossed the bridge over the railway lines, he saw the station, black with people struggling with one another to clamber into a goods train. The old bridge

bent under the weight of the cars, and when he reached the other side, Varga gave a sigh of relief. But on the road he was not able to drive as fast as he could for here too, there was the same crush as in town. 'At this rate — he said to himself — it'll take ten days to get to Moneasa.'

*

"Mr. Sabiiiiiiin."

"Where's Mr. Sabin?"

"Somewhere over there..."

"Mr. Sabiiiin, what are we to do with the parcels?"

Octavian entered the warehouse, wet with perspiration. He said sharply:

"Put them in order... In half an hour we're expecting a special train."

Some persons who were moving restlessly in front of the store, rushed at him.

"For God's sake, a seat... please, a seat..."

"I'll pay anything..."

Octavian looked at them sadly. He tried to encourage them.

"Don't worry. There'll be trains, but we may not have to leave. It's said the Russians are very near to Cluj...

He cast a glance into the storehouse. The men were sorting the parcels. He was pleased. Since the morning, when Orban had sent for him, the sight of the disorder had filled him with vexation. One should keep one's head, no matter what hapened. In a quarter of an hour, he had hidden away in the cellar the most valuable things in the house, and had run to the station. Here Orban would not budge from the telephone, ringing up all sorts of authorities, asking them for advice, written orders, if possible. He naturally could not get in touch with anyone.

"What are we to do, Mr. Sabin?" he asked wringing his hands.

Octavian answered martially:

"First and foremost, you must get all the telegraphs out of gear and prevent the telephone exchange from working, that's what you've got to do."

"And what about the valuables?"

"We'll manage to get a special train for that."

"And who'll take the responsibility? We've got large amounts... Who?"

Octavian snapped:

"I will."

"Thank you..." Orban caught hold of his hand and shook it; "that's a load off my heart. Here... take, this..." He handed him a loaded service revolver. Then, he asked doubtfully: "D'you really mean to take the responsibility?"

"Of course I do. I'll be in the storehouse."

He now was annoyed he had accepted. There were so many things to be done here and Orban was a softy... The enemy must not find anything they could use.

He flew into a passion when he saw people trying to clamber into the empty carriages. 'Thank God, Ana and the boy aren't here. They will manage somehow. Andrei takes after me. He won't lose his head.' Suddenly an idea flashed through his mind and he hurried across the lines, towards the engine shed. The mechanics were examining the engines. On the tall grey wall someone had written in letters a yard high: "Down with the Invading Fascists!" He felt his heart swelling and tears of pride came into his eyes... 'That's just like us railway workers.'

In the big shed he heard a powerful voice:

"We mustn't leave one engine to the fascists, comrades!"

He entered, blinking to get used to the darkness. Oh, there was Uncle Jurca. He went up to him and stook his hand.

"Hello, Mihai..."

The old man stopped for a moment, in surprise:

"Hello, Octavian... What's up?"

"Listen, this is what I think we ought to do... The railway lines going west ought to be dismantled... D'you get me? Get up a gang, right away... Damage the semaphores too..." He had known Uncle Jurca for years, since the time of the salary cuts when they had gone on a twenty-four hours strike, together with the whole railway company. They would sometimes have a glass of good wine together at some pub near the station. "What do you people intend to do?"

"Well, we'll put up a resistance in the station until we dismantle the factory. We'll fight..."

"With what?"

We've got a little..."

Octavian coughed solemnly to conceal his emotion.

"Well, that'll be alright. And look here. . ." He pulled out the revolver from his pocket and handed it to him. "You may need it."

"And what about you, Octavian?"

"I'm going away with the valuables... As soon as I get a special train... Just an engine and one carriage. . ." He sighed dejectedly: "I'm so sorry, Uncle Mihai. Look at all these big men, struggling like wild beasts to get into a train. They ought to be taken and made to fight. It's us, the old ones, who've got guts. . ."

Mihai Jurca was biting his moustache.

"Well, damn all those bloody toffs!"

They stood for a while, one beside the other, in silence. On the platform, people were swarming; the place rang with cries, screams and banging.

"In an hour, I'll send you an engine," said Jurca solemnly.

They shook hands.

"I hope we meet again soon in our beloved Cluj," said Octavian in a trembling voice. "Take care of yourselves, lads."

Elbowing his way across the platform he went into the station building. He wanted to see if the telephone wires were being taken away.

He distributed advice right and left, adding every time:

"Don't forget where you put the spare parts, we'll need them... We're coming back."

*

The prefect was vainly trying to get in touch with General Grinţeş, the commander of the garrison. He had looked for him everywhere, but had been told that he had just left, and the news he got on those occasions were all contradictory: either the attack had a strictly local character — an attempt to test the forces — or that detachments of Tiger and Ferdinand tanks had made their appearance, and the horsemen sent against them had been run over by the caterpillar bands. Belega banged down the telephone receiver, which his A.D.C., well-groomed and calm laid with a gesture of reproach on its hook.

The moment he had heard of the attack, the prefect had got his family into a service car, had given them an

armed sergeant as escort and sent them off to Ineu with a letter for Major Maxineanu asking him to look after them. Immediately after that, the mayor had come, shouting and banging the table with his fist, demanding that a railway carriage be placed at his disposal that he might take refuge in the centre of Transylvania. Belega had shrugged his strong shoulders and Chidioșan had turned crimson with rage. When the mayor tried to say another word, the prefect had turned him out. He had ordered the big doors of the prefecture to be locked so as to stop the crowd of officials coming in and asking for means of conveyance. Then, in the following hours, Belega realized that everything was in a state of chaos, that there was no defence worth mentioning, and that the rumours that had been heard of General Grințeș's pro-German attitude had been well-grounded. The fact that he could not find him anywhere, maddened him. He had already sent four messengers on horseback, but the officers had returned, covered with dust and wet with perspiration, to inform him that the lines of defence could not resist, that in the three weeks that followed August 23, nothing had been done, although a joint German-Hungarian attack was to be expected. The telephone line with Bucharest was disconnected again and no one knew what was going on there.

At noon, Belega decided to send the whole prefecture to the devil and take command of the garrison. It was just after the short German air-raid when he had heard that the Germans had dropped handfulls of grenades and bottles of petrol. That meant they had no bombs and that, generally speaking, the attack had not been prepared. Colonel Papastate had been severely wounded; a machine-gun bullet had perforated his stomach, and his *locum tenens*, Major Fundescu, had ordered all the cannons to be immediatly loaded on trucks and taken to the front, where he meant to use them against the tanks.

"Get all the archives collected and loaded into lorries," ordered Belega his A.D.C., and the latter, although surprised, answered, according to regulations:

"Yes, sir."

Of course he had not the slightest intention of doing it, so he ordered a gendarmerie second lieutenent to get

a lorry immediately, saying it was the prefect's order. In the courtyard, Belega put on his gloves and was about to enter his service-car, when an officer came up to him, accompanied by a tall, strong man, with brown hair and an energetic-looking face.

"Sir. . ." began the latter in a thick voice, but the general would not let him finish.

"I'm in a hurry. I'm leaving for the front."

"That's just why I've come," said the man. "I've come on behalf of the Communist Party."

The general gaped.

"And what do you want?" he managed to say, solemnly.

"To get in touch with you. The patriotic guards have 124 rifles, 11 automatic pistols and one machine-gun. We'd like you to give us an officer to teach us the use of the automatic weapons.

"Yes," said Belega, to gain time; then, straightening his cap, he looked at the other haughtily. "You will hand over all that armament to a group of soldiers whom I shall send this very moment to accompany you. I won't allow you to do as you like. What is your name?"

The man raised his eyebrows, and his forehead covered itself with beads of perspiration. He fidgeted with his fingers before answering in a hollow voice:

"General, we shall ensure the protection of the factory while a shock gang will dismantle the interior rails. The fascists must not be able to use the installations."

"You'll hand over the armament," said the general, feeling he was losing his temper.

He guessed rather than heard the other man's answer.

"No, we won't."

"Why not?" exclaimed the general, in a tone that was not too sure either." What do you mean? What do you intend to do? You surely understand that tomorrow, at the latest, the Germans will be here, don't you?"

"We shall resist until we dismantle some of the installations, then we shall retreat and fight as partisans. We will not hand over the arms. On the contrary you ought to give us ammunition. We're rather short of it."

Belega felt he had been rash. As a matter of fact, if they wanted to die, it was their own business. All his being,

however, rebelled at the thought that in the town for which he was responsible, there existed groups of armed civilians.

"And how can you guarantee... hm! that you won't use the arms for other purposes?"

The man's grey eyes flashed and the general had the absurd impression that he was about to fly at him. He tried to mend his words by a smile that could have meant:

"You know I'm responsible for all this... I must take all the necessary measures, all possible precautions."

"And for what exactly could we use them?" asked the other, his teeth clenched. The rattle of a machine-gun was heard clearly, coming from somewhere in the neighbourhood. The general instinctively bent his back and took a step towards the car beside which a soldier was standing at attention, his automatic pistol slung across his chest.

"Do as you please," he said, "do as you want. I haven't the right to give you ammunition. Good luck!"

The car drove away at top speed. Gheorghe Jurca watched the gate open and the crowd outside getting out of the way in terror, and he cursed between his teeth.

"May the devil take you, you bloody fascist!"

General Belega did not get far. In the heavy traffic on the boulevard the car could drive but very slowly, as behind a hearse. In vain did he roar and threaten, his revolver in his hand. Those in front of him made room, but it was of no avail. As far as eyes could reach, the boulevard was full of refugees.

"The head of the column is at Pîncota—said someone—we can't go any quicker... What? Do you think we wouldn't like to flee faster?"

"I'm not fleeing!" roared the general. "I'm going to the front."

When, at last, he resigned himself to drive on at a slower pace, he heard someone calling him:

"Sir! Sir!"

His A.D C., without his cap, was galloping madly among the flower beds that divided the boulevard in two parts. He stopped suddenly by the car, pulling in the reins, and the horse reared and snorted. Without dismounting, the A.D.C. said:

"General Grinţeş has gone over to the enemy in a plane piloted by lieutenant Ghica."

The crowd that surrounded them heard everything.

"Treason. The commanding general has surrendered!"

"Run."

"The Germans!"

"The tanks have entered Gai!"

"It's an alert! The planes are coming!"

Rocking to the left and to the right, the line of vehicles broke. A fat woman pressed against the wall waved her hands suffocating, then was trodden over. A horse-carriage was upset, colliding with a tree, and the horse shook its head and quietly started browning the wild rose-bush.

Belega, pistol in hand, ordered his chauffeur:

"Hey, drive on. Faster! Don't you see we can get on now?"

The car's mudguard struck a perambulator full of boards, ran over a goose and then sped on. The A.D.C. spurred his horse and putting his hands to his mouth, cried:

"German terrorists have set fire to the petrol supply at the aerodrome!"

For a moment, Belega, his strength failing him, thought of putting a bullet through his temple, then, prodding the chauffeur between his shoulders with his revolver barrel, he said meekly:

"Turn back."

"How can I turn back, sir?" whined the sergeant. "How can I?"

"Turn back, don't you hear?" thundered Belega and he shot in the air. "Pass over them. To headquarters!"

He leaned back, while the khaki-coloured car rushed, at full speed at the line of vehicles driving along. Shrieks were heard, one of the wheels of the car rose passing over something soft, then the chauffeur turned into a side street. 'But where the devil were the headquarters?' wondered Belega.

"Stop!"

He got out and sat down on the foot-board, his elbows resting on his knees.

*

"My dears," said baron Papp gracefully shaking his pear-shaped head, "I am too old to leave. I could nct think of it. You've heard what happened to Motzeanu, haven't you? He went to the station, in the morning, with all his luggage. He was robbed as on the highway, and then he started a fight with someone and a tile fell on his head. Now he's at the hospital, and who knows where his wife is. You can do what you like."

"If you know anything, baron — moaned Guiaşiu with wide, beseeching gestures — please, if you have any information . . .do not leave us in the dark. Let us know what we should do."

"Baron," said Pordea in a bland tone. He had forgotten to cover up his bald patch, and his long, black, greasy locks were hanging to one side, showing his pink skull sticky with hair oil.

"I am not going anywhere. I am an old man. You can do as you please. . ."

"Baron — ventured Guiaşiu — I've managed to get a motor lorry; it will hold a lot of things."

"I'm not going! I'm too old for such adventures."

Pordea and Guiaşiu exchanged looks with Nicuşor Spinanţiu. "The latter was wearing a shooting jacket and breeches with leggings, and a check cap well pulled down over his eyes. He seemed in a hurry and motioned to the other two men to leave the old man to his fate; they could not afford to lose time in arguing with him. Every quarter of an hour, a Messerschmidt flew over the roofs, causing a dreadful panic along the more and more crowded road. They took leave of Papp who looked at them in a strange way. It made them all uneasy. Why was the baron not running away? After their departure Papp called his servant and said to him:

"Go to No 26, Horia Street and tell Rabbi Silbermann that he may come and hide here. No one will find him, tell him so. Go. Tell him he should take care not to be seen and no one must know where he is coming to stay. Keep an eye upon yourself."

Left alone, Papp seated himself on his tall-backed chair and closed his eyes. He said to himself that his move proved his political acumen beyond human understanding, and

highly satisfied with himself, he cracked one after another each of his long white fingers. Through the closed window only a faint buzzing sound could be heard. Suddenly the entrance bell began to buzz, and before Papp could tell the maid-servant that he was not in, she had gone and opened the door to Vîslan. His crumpled, wet shirt, was hanging out of his trousers, his boots were down at heel and white with dust, his sparse hair was sticking to his blotched forehead, while his lips were quivering spasmodically.

"What's the matter with you," cried Papp in a high pitched voice. "Have you been drinking?"

His teeth chattering in his mouth, Vîslan staggered up to him. His look was so vacant, so empty, that Papp was frightened.

"What do you want?"

Vîslan leaned against the desk with both hands.

"I must go away... go away..." he muttered. "I can't stay on... they'll kill me... they don't know what pity is..."

"Go then," said the baron coldly, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

"I haven't got a copper... I spent all I had on drink the day before yesterday. I haven't a copper. How can I go? People are off their heads. You don't know what is going on in the streets... A catastrophe! General Grinţeş has betrayed and flown away in a plane, today at eleven. There is no line of defence. If this goes on, in six days the Germans and the Hungarians will be in Bucharest. I haven't a copper. How can I go into the wide world?"

"And what do you want?"

"Take me along with you."

"I've no room. I'm leaving with the prefect, presently. He took pity on my impotent old age."

Vîslan had no longer the strength to cry. He wiped his face with his blackened hand, leaving streaks of dirt on it.

"Then lend me some money... no matter how little. Enough to get away..."

"Money? Hm!" said the baron, scratching the crown of his head. He took a great pleasure in seeing Vîslan suffering so much in front of him. This gave him the feeling

of full power over people. It was not that he had any ill-feeling for Vîslan.

"Please, baron, I beg you, in the name of all that you hold sacred. I have most serious reasons to leave."

"Sit down in that arm-chair and tell me what those reasons are," said the baron suavely.

"I have reasons," cried Vîslan mustering all his strength in this outcry. "I tell you I have."

"Oh, you're discreet, I appreciate it. I haven't a penny in the house."

Vîslan bit his lips until the blood came, to keep back the oaths he felt coming. His stare was so wild, so like a beast's that the baron finally took pity on him.

"I've got no money in the house," he said, "but... if you come again in four or five hours, I may be able to give you some. It's in the bank... d'you understand?"

Vîslan said nothing. He rose to his feet with clenched fists and made for the door, like someone walking in his sleep. From there, he turned and said slowly, very clearly, stressing every word:

"Oh, it does not matter! You'll pay a hundred-fold. You are all at my mercy. All of you, do you get me? All the leaders of the National-Peasant party, and I shall give it you well, I shall ruin you, I shall destroy you! You will see what Vîslan can do!"

"Well, I never," cried Papp after him, but the journalist had run away. 'A brute,' commented the old man quietly.

Still he was burning with curiosity. 'What did that mean? What if he really?... Well, no matter, he would see.'

*

It was a wonder that Suslănescu and Mimi escaped being crushed by the stream of people running towards the outskirts of the town.

Suslănescu walked as in a nightmare, strutting along with the funny and unbecoming steps of a stork. He kept saying, right and left: "Please, make room," then he asked Mimi: "Aren't you tired, dear?"

She was walking on, her teeth set, careful not to be crushed (a car had just grazed her hip and torn her dress

showing her pink panties and her suspender, but she did not care.)

All morning Suslănescu had desperately looked for a means of conveyance. An old man with a push-cart had asked an enormous price to take them to the station. At that moment the first German planes had appeared, firing at the people in the street. The old man ran into a doorway, and Suslănescu stole the cart and ran home with it as fast as he could. They had loaded it hurriedly with the Velceanu couple's belongings: suits of clothes, a radio-set ,books and then joined the flow of vehicles. Suslănescu realized he would soon be unable to go any further on and that the capsizing cart would hurl him in the air like a catapult.

On reaching the outskirts of the town, they met Father Crăioc. He was carrying a huge bundle on his back, tied up in a silk quilt. To walk easier, he had pinned up the skirts of his cassock, showing his long, blue striped drawers. Sweating and swearing like a trooper, he came near them and without asking leave, flung his bundle right in the middle of the cart.

"How lucky I've met you. I could not have borne it any longer." What times we are living in. He noticed Suslănescu was exhausted. "Let me get back my breath a little. Then I'll push too..."

The priest had not thought of remaining in town.

Although he was a widower and his only child Mihail Dante had died at the front, Crăioc valued life. Seeing everybody running away, he had decided he would not stay behind either. He was overjoyed that he would not be alone.

"It would be no use going to the station, my son. What a sad sight! I heard an aeroplane dropped some bombs and killed everybody. We'll walk on and on, as far as we can, *per pedes apostolorum*, like the holy fathers. They had no automobiles and the Lord did not forsake them. Make room! Make room!" he kept calling "don't you see I'm an old man and a priest ?... Oh, Lord, have mercy. Help us to get out of here!"

Suslănescu pushed the cart and passing over the tram-lines that lead to the vineyards, stumbled and, if Mimi

had not held him, would certainly have fallen. He felt so weak that he could have cried with vexation. His arms trembled painfully and it was now only that he realized how hot he was. "When will all this come to an end? My God, my God!" He wanted to pray, but could not. He had to push the cart with the Velceanu's belongings. From the tram-car, crammed with people, shrieks rang out: "Make room! Go off the line or you'll be run over!" the tram rolled past rocking and clattering with a noise of old iron. Suslănescu was too slow in stepping aside and the cart was bumped. It broke down and the travelling bags fell to the ground their contents scattered about. The people who came behind tramped over them. Mimi leapt in among the bags, but at that very moment, the stream of vehicles stopped, turned, and with a dreadful roar, tried to stream back. The collision between those who wanted to turn back and the others who were leaving the town, occurred at the very spot where Suslănescu was standing. One thought only flashed through Suslănescu's dead-tired mind: 'I must not fall, I must not fall.' He leapt up like a swimmer, felt his chest and sides squeezed, his blood-shot eyes bulging out of their sockets.

"The tanks! The tanks!"

From the other side of the crossing between the railway line and the tram line, two big grey tanks, with a black cross on the plating, had appeared. The gun-turret of the one in front revolved slowly, then the barrel spat out a long flame. The rumble was drowned in the roar of the crowd of people crushing one another, tramping one another underfoot. Struck right in the middle, the tram-car broke down with a loud cracking noise, and was flattened like a big, yellow accordeon, crushing scores of people under it. The tank turned round and continued to fire right into the middle of the crowd, with all the weapons it possessed. In an instant the road was covered with dead bodies. A small greenish car was overset in the ditch, its tires punctured; a smartly dressed gentleman came out of the open door, but a volley of bullets caught him in its sheath and cut him almost into two. The tanks advanced, crushing everything under their caterpillar-bands, firing along the road. Suslănescu lost sight of Mimi. The group

of people in which he was rushed like a ram to the paling of a house, pushed it down and Suslănescu found himself running like mad through a kitchen garden, tramping upon the cucumber stalks. He stumbled and fell, feeling a short piercing blow in the chest. 'That's the end,' he said to himself. 'That's the end.' His face stuck to the rich soil smelling of dung. He lay so for a moment then, with an effort, leapt to his feet; his eyes fell on his shirt-front where a big red stain was becoming broader and broader. His strength abandoned him again, and he fell down anew, slowly, like a heap of sand. 'I'm hurt,' he thought lucidly. He was waiting to die. He could hear the snoring of the tank clearly, advancing along the road, digging up with its caterpillars the asphalt of the road, the cracking of the vehicles over which it passed andthe continual deafening rattle of the machine-guns. Raising himself painstakingly on an elbow, he turned and lay on one side. Then he perceived that the red stain was sprinkled with small seeds, and laughing insanely, he realized he had crushed a tomato in his fall. He set out at a run. Over his head, bullets were whizzing and he threw himself headlong under a hedge of thorny bushes, where nettles and weeds grew freely. Behind him some one was sing-songing: 'Blessed be thou, O Mother of God!'

He turned. It was Crăioc, his cassock in tatters, with a deep scratch across his cheek.

"Father," cried Suslănescu, "let's run. Come on."

They started together, not knowing where they were going, and crossed a large and very clean courtyard; they jumped over a low fence and found themselves in a back street where some people were lying under the fences and trees. One of them rose to his feet and Suslănescu recognized him: it was Mr. Varga in rags, his nose purple and swollen. He was waving his left hand, from which drops of blood were running, as though out of a small live watering-can. Suslănescu fell in his arms and they kissed foolishly on the mouth.

"Stop all that kissing!" moaned Crăioc, his strength failing. "Come on, men, let's get on, the Germans have entered the town."

"My car..." said Varga in a thin, indifferent voice, "the tire was hit by a bullet... and bang!... I was flung

out. Look, the wind-screen has taken all the skin off my hand, . . .now nothing can. . . we must, mustn't we. . . for...'' ha, ha, ha,'' and his laugh sounded like a bleat. Then, turning pale he tore away; Suslănescu and Crăioc followed him and caught him in their arms, just when he was fainting.

*

In front of the factory the boulevard was empty; deserted as it was it looked ghastly. A lorry stopped, its brakes grinding, and Jurca jumped off the cases on which he had been perched. Two soldiers and a second lieutenant started unloading them, helped by a few workers who had come at a run, their guns in their hands. Mopping the sweat off his face, Jurca said:

"Where's my father?''

"There,'' pointed out Horváth, bending under the weight of a square case, its sides covered by iron bands. "How did you manage?''

"Just so,'' nodded Jurca, quite spent. "See. . . more than two thousand. . .''

"That's the case with cartridge-belts,'' said the young and blushing second lieutenant. "I'm off to see how you've arranged the positions.''

"Unload the lorry,'' said Jurca. "How's the dismantling getting on?''

"It's begun. What are we to do with the dismantled spare parts?''

"That's Holtzmann's job,'' answered Jurca, walking off with rapid strides. He crossed the deserted courtyard where the lines had been lifted away and went towards the destroyed wing of the factory. When he turned towards the offices, he came across old Horváth carrying a large Rumanian flag.

"What are you going to do with it, Uncle Horváth?'' asked Jurca puzzled.

"Why, haven't you heard? The Hungarian bourgeoisie in town are preparing to hang out their flags. I'm going up to hoist this one on top of the factory.''

Jurca blinked and without saying a word hugged the old man; he was thin and bald with a long, large, fair moustache, hanging limply.

"Why," muttered old Horváth deeply moved, "why this is, yes... this is a national problem."

The western wall of the factory had been bombed here and there and was indented like a parapet. The workers of the patriotic guard were lined up along it; some of them were wearing firemen's helmets. In the centre they had built a sort of a casemate where they had placed the ZB machine-gun; a young man whom Jurca didn't know, was lying on his belly, wiping the barrel with a cloth. The voice of Uncle Jurca rang out, almost merrily:

"Now see to it, youngsters, dig for all you are worth, and don't stand there gossiping! It will soon be rather hot here. Make the pit deep enough, but not too deep, or it will be hard for you to shoot. Dig deeper in the left corner, where you lean your elbow."

Some workers were striking with their pick-axes at the hard earth of the courtyard, others were carrying bricks and placing them in front of the screens like a sort of a breastwork.

"Are you a professional soldier ?" the second lieutenant asked the old man, very respectfully and somewhat puzzled.

All morning he had seen nothing but a chaos, senior officers running away in confusion; everyone of his questions had received a contradictory answer. Since noon he had been standing with his group of men in front of the prefecture, waiting to be sent to the first line; he soon realized no one knew where the first line actually was and how far the Germans and the Hungarians had advanced. Half of his men had been taken by an engineers' officer who was hurrying to mine the bridge over he Mureş, although he thought it was useless. Then he had gone straight up to the sturdy grey-haired man who had acquainted him with General Belega's order to place himself immediately at the disposal of the Patriotic Guard which would defend the station quarter. The second lieutenant had followed him about; they had both raced to the deposit in the Citadel where, after a lot of shuffling, they were given a lorry full of ammunition (after the intervention of a major who seemed to know Jurca very well); now, on coming here he had found order and discipline. He particularly liked the old man who walked about quietly,

his hands behind his back, with a big Mauser pistol in its wooden case hanging on his hip. 'He must have been a sergeant,' he said to himself. That is why he had asked him if he was a soldier by profession.

"For a time, comrade," replied the old man laughing.

The word 'comrade' surprised the officer. "So those are the communists!" Somewhat confused, he started moving about among them, correcting the pit made by one of them, examining if the machine-gun had a wide enough free shooting range in front.

"Look up there," said a tall stoker, pointing the tiled roof of the offices.

All turned round. A man dwarfed by the distance, could be seen climbing carefully up the chimney unfolding a three-coloured flag, waving it and fixing it on to the top of the chimney.

"That's old Horváth," said Jurca, nodding, and then explained to the officer: "You see, he's a Hungarian."

From the distance came the sound of machine-guns firing.

"They've reached the vineyards," said the officer, opening his revolver case. "That means that in an hour or even sooner, they'll be here."

A thrill passed through the row of men. Some of them jumped into the pits and took up their guns.

"What ho! There's no hurry," said old Jurca quietening them.

"How can we help hurrying, Uncle Mihai?" said the stoker who had been released from prison with Jurca after August 23... "What a time it is since I've been wanting to put a bullet into fascist bellies, by Jiminy."

Gheorghe Jurca came near his father and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Where's Holtzmann?" he asked anxiously.

"He's gone with the first transport of dismantled spare parts... Have you found a safe place?"

"Yes, a very good one..."

Gheorghe looked around, pulled a case nearer, sat down on it and producing from his pocket a parcel wrapped in newspaper, opened it and began hurriedly to eat some dry bread and bacon. Standing in front of him, the old man looked at his son, affectionately.

"Won't you have some, father?" asked Gheorghe, his mouth full.

"No... no... take your time, Gheorghiță..."

Around them, the men were moving silently. From the distance came the noise made by the crowd in the station.

"Hasn't Szilágy come yet?" asked Gheorghe.

"No, but don't worry. The train is well guarded."

"I know... I know..."

As soon as they had heard of the fascists' attack, Jurca had organized a gang to ensure the evacuation of the workers' families in the station quarter. A train formed beyond the engine-shed was to take them all to Lugoj. Gheorghe summed up the position to himself: 'At the textile works the bobbin-frames and the swivels have been destroyed, the electricity-plant is ready to stop working, in two hours the tramcars all over the town will stop. All's in perfect order.'

"You are hungry, no doubt about that," said Uncle Mihai laying a hand on his shoulder. "You haven't said a word...."

Gheorghe looked up at him; his face was thoughtful. He shook his head.

"Listenhere, Gheorghe..." The old man sat down beside him, on the edge of the case. "I think you're not right... Why don't you leave me in town? I know the job, hang it all. For the last four years — not four years, thirty odd years..."

"You're telling me all that as a father to his son, aren't you?" said Gheorghe trying to laugh. "You've been given a task, you've got to fulfil it. Resist here as long as possible. Then get the lads out of town and take them to Ineu... He rose and came nearer the old man. I suppose you know what 'as long as possible' means?"

"Why, of course I do," said the old man, darkly. "If I were a general..."

"You may still become one..."

"Listen, and if we can't get to Ineu, how shall I let you know?"

"Don't you know where I am to be found?"

"I do,of course I do... Don't you see? merely trying to talk to you a little longer."

"I see, father... I understand... Don't worry..."

"Take care of yourselves."

Half an hour later, Holtzmann arrived: he was in his shirt-sleeves, his face crimson and covered with perspiration. He kept wiping his eyeglasses. He reported to Jurca, his hand to his temple, like a soldier, that the dismantled spare parts had been put in a safe place. Very pale and trying hard to control himself, Schwartz passed near them. His lips were quivering under the strain.

"Hey, Ion — cried Jurca — get your gun. Now's the time to show what you can do, my lad."

"Don't you worry, Comrade Jurca."

The town seemed to have quieted down. It was about five o'clock in the afternoon. The sun, wrapped in a thin veil of dust, shone as hot as molten lead. There was not a breeze. From the Citadel came cannon shots, few and far between. A loud explosion followed by another two, was heard, and the ground shook as though under a swift gallop.

"They've blown up the bridge," said the second lieutenant, very pale too. "It means that. . ."

"To your posts!" rang old Jurca's thick, loud voice. "Give me that," he said pointing to the field-glasses hanging round the officer's neck.

He swept the lenses over the field in front, over the shunting-station where a goods train with red wagons had been abandoned, then higher still, over the villas bathed in a sort of bluish mist, but he saw nothing.

Gheorghe Jurca ran towards the place where the factory had been bombarded. Here, among all the twisted pieces of iron forming a sort of tracery, a few workers and some twenty young men who had been freed from the German train, were stationed.

"Everything is alright, Comrade Jurca," said a fair young man, shaking his rather longish hair.

Jurca closed his eyes. He would have liked to go near every worker lying there along the peeling wall, his fingers gripping the shiny butt of his weapon, and hug him close. Stray shots were heard nearer and nearer, as though in the neighbouring street. He almost laughed remembering the silly articles in the "Tribuna Democratică." They spoke of the role played by the members

of the National-Peasant party and by the city's intelligentsia, who opposed with such splendid heroism the hostile attempts, and the communists were abused — very discreetly, it is true — but any one could understand . . . 'Well, no matter, we shall settle things between us, one day,' he said to himself. 'The important fact is that a hundred workers are here waiting to fight, that on the factory the Rumanian flag is waving.' He took out his watch. It was time to go, but it was very hard for him. He went towards the wall. His father was smoking his pipe and saying to the men:

"Yes, pals, that's how we fought years ago, in the Red Army. Once I shall tell you all I went through, and I'll have a lot to tell." Looking up he saw his son standing by him. He understood the time had come when they had to part and his heart felt sore. He rose heavily, pushing aside the wooden case of his revolver hanging on his hip, and coughed. His pipe was lit and smoking in his hand.

"My boy. . . he said," but could not get any further. He laid his hoary head on his son's strong shoulder and tapped him on the back several times.

"Farewell. . . farewell. . ." he whispered. Then he shook Holtzmann's hand.

"Good luck, comrades!" said Jurca raising his fist.

"Good luck," said voices from all sides.

Gheorghe cast a last glance at everything, then turned round and walked off, followed by Holtzmann. The shots rang out drily, like walnuts cracked under the heel.

*

Vîslan trudged along holding on to the walls. He was famishing. The briny perspiration that had soaked his eyebrows, was now running down into his eyes, blinding him. There was nothing to be done. Everything was over. He would be caught. He would be shot. He knew now that the Germans would win the war.

The deserted town, the empty streets along which were running at intervals some belated fugitives or groups of soldiers without their helmets, and their tunics unbuttoned, dragging behind them small anti-tank cannons, made him

more frightened than the frantic bustle of the morning. And he was terribly hungry. He entered a courtyard, the gate of which was wide open. Treading on the narrow walk strewn with cinders, he intended to enter the house and find something to eat. The place seemed deserted, so he could very well hide here. This simple discovery shone in front of his aching eyes like a constellation. When he had passed through a grove of dwarfed trees he mounted the steps of the house and saw a plate of black tin on which was written in gilt letters, covered with verdigris: *Dr. A. Georgescu, gynaecologist.* The tall door with a sort of miniature glass-canopy was open. The pleasant coolness of the entrance hall, with a soothing smell of medicine, was for Vîslan like a refreshing shower bath. He saw at one glance the white chairs, the small round table on which an open book and a half knitted stocking had been forgotten. The hall was round and had eight doors. Vîslan opened one of them which he was sure led to the pantry and found himself in a sort of drawing-room, in which the light was on, as the blinds had been drawn. He had not the time to draw back; an old woman, in black clothes, was gathering bundles of money with her crooked claw-like hands.

"What do you want?" she whispered, her round hen-like eyes riveted on him.

"I've been sent by Doctor Georgescu — he said mechanically — to fetch you. . ."

"Oh!" shrieked the woman, her hands pulling at her dyed red hair. "Oh!"

Vîslan went nearer. The woman howled again, as though strangled.

"Doctor Georgescu has sent me," said Vîslan between his teeth.

"Heeeeelp! Heeeeelp!"

The lamp-shade on the table shook and the soft yellowish light flickered on the thick, mahogany table, showing the paper money.

"Out you go! Go, I tell you! What do you want?"

"Doctor Georgescu . . . muttered Vîslan, snatching swiftly all the money, while with his other hand he pulled the table-cloth. The lamp, disconnected, went

out and in the darkness that now filled the room, the woman's prolonged howl echoed. Vîslan ran out, frightened to death. When he reached the courtyard, he stopped, felt the money in his pocket, realized that all that had happened had not been a dream, that he had money and had escaped. 'But what do I need money for ?' he wondered, and sitting down on the kerbstone began to laugh thickly, his head bent back. The cannon shots that he heard made him take to his heels. At the end of the street he saw a large tank rocking on towards him. He turned, took to the left running right through a deserted by-street. He felt nothing, neither hunger, nor fatigue, any more. 'The Germans have entered the town. They must not get me.' The houses were deserted, the shutters drawn. 'No, no, they can't catch me. I have been left alone, in the whole town, but if I don't hurry, they'll catch me.' After a while he realized he did not know whither he was running, and that they would catch him. To the station. 'Yes, yes, that's it, the station. The station master and the clerks are always the last to leave, like the officers on a sinking ship. They will take him too, for he has money.'

Colliding with the trees, he ran along the streets, until he reached the boulevard. A group of cavalrymen were coming from the station. The horses were galloping madly, their bellies almost close to the ground, like enormous black locusts. An officer, brandishing his sword was roaring something and Vîslan heard the hissing of the air cut by the bluish blade. He had never thought he was so strong, that he could stand the super-human fatigue of that day.' I've escaped,' he thought when he saw the station-buildings. He dashed in among the ruins and went out on to the platform. He fell several times, once over a dead body. Heaps of luggage and travelling bags had been left lying about there; without slowing down, Vîslan bent down and picked up one, a very smart one, over which a leather coat was bound with a belt. From the left a machine-gun volley was heard and the gravel between the lines hissed: a bullet hit against a sleeper and with a prolonged whizz swerved off. Vîslan saw no train and began to shout desperately:

"Hey! Is there nobody there ?"

On his left from behind the peeled, brownish wall of the engine-shed, came the sound of quick shooting. Looking up towards the vineyards, Vîslan saw soldiers running and throwing themselves down between the vine-props. A sharp blow in the travelling bag made him lie down on his belly. He saw, not far from him, the black door of a goods wagon open and rushed to it. When he clambered up the steps, around him a lot of stones were hurled against the walls of the wagon. He could not think of anything. He noticed as though it did not concern him, that it was warm, that evening was coming on, that...

"Halt!" rang a brief order, when he rolled like a bag of potatoes down the other side of the wagon. Throwing away the bag he began to shriek, gesticulating frantically and discovering his breast:

"Don't shoot! Don't! I'm a Rumanian! Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

The black eye of a revolver approached him. Voiceless, his tongue thicker, Vîslan managed to mumble:

"Rumanian... Rumanian..." He dared look up and, ready to fall down in a swoon, he saw the grey-green field uniform, the black stripes with a skull and cross-bones, and the dark face of a German officer. He put up his hands, slowly. His knees gave way and a hiccough shook all his body.

The officer raised his pistol, but instead of shooting burst into a roar of laughter.

"Comrade Vîslan. Don't you recognize me?"

Vîslan opened his eyes wide, thinking he had gone mad. In front of him stood Horia Banciu, the former head of the legionary movement in the district.

From the factory came the firing of a machine-gun. A German soldier lying on his belly was loading his gun, and called:

"Down! Down!" He spoke Rumanian.

"Long live the legion and the captain!"* whimpered Vîslan, but he had not the slightest idea why he had said that.

*

* The salute of the members of the Iron Guard

Jurca was looking at his watch for the tenth time, when the second lieutenant, who kept staring at him all the while, cried out shrilly:

"The enemy!"

The men lying along the wall seemed to stop breathing. A voice asked in whispers:

"Where? Where are they?"

"There," answered the second lieutenant holding out his hand. "Look, take as land-mark the lonely tree on the top of the hill. You can see people moving."

The cock of a gun rattled.

"Wait, man!" cried Mihai Jurca. "You don't want to start firing, do you?"

"Why not? Why not?" asked Schwartz, licking his parched lips and suppressing a hiccough.

"You must all listen to me!" ordered the old man. "No firing unless I give orders. Till then, lie perfectly still..."

"All right, all right," asserted the second lieutenant, who could hardly breathe with excitement. He unbuckled his belt, opened the collar of his shirt and, pushing back his helmet, went to the machine-gun, pushed aside Frenţiu, who had slung a cartridge belt around his shoulders, and examined the firing mechanism.

"Don't rush, don't fire in vain," Jurca was saying monotonously. "Let them get very near, thinking there's no one here, and then we begin. Otherwise they'll smash us to smithereens. D'you get me?"

"Yes," somebody answered.

The old man produced his revolver, balanced it in his hand, then lay down in the pit too, arranging the cord of his spectacles behind his ears.

"My eyes are none too strong," he said smiling.

Lying close to the hard ground of the courtyard, he was listening for the sound of the firing. Turning on one side, he took out a bit of paper on which Holtzmann had drawn a map of the town. Then he rose and ran along the walls, to the workshop. Szilágyi, Murgu and engineer Şoldan were taking the spare parts out of every machine and packing them away in a big case.

"Hurry up," said the old man. "The Germans are here!" Şoldan mopped the perspiration off his forehead with the sleeve of his smock.

"We'll be ready in an hour," he said, tired out. "In an hour."

"We can resist an hour," said Jurca determinedly, although he was not very sure. "Go ahead. Is the car in the yard?"

"Yes."

"Can you load everything in one lorry?"

"No. We need two transports."

The next minute, old Jurca was at his place. Soldiers could be seen, coming down one by one, among the vine-props. They could not be distinguished clearly, because of the setting sun, and he was annoyed that he had not found some better place for himself.

That showed he had no experience. The second lieutenant came near him and said:

"We haven't placed the machine-gun well. We're right in front of them. The shooting level is too low."

"And what do you want to do?" asked Mihai Jurca.

"I'd like to go, if I may, on the station roof."

"How will you get up there?"

"I'll see..."

"Go. Wait a second... I don't even know your name..."

"Second lieutenant Ionescu," he said, introducing himself, in soldierly fashion.

"Hey, gunners, follow Comrade Lieutenant Ionescu where he says."

Seeing that no one was firing, the Germans were descending in compact groups. They were right in the middle of the hill now, and everyone of their movements was visible. Jurca realized they wanted to get down to where a row of acacia-trees might serve as a shelter.

"Hey!" he called. "Put the range at 500. Take a good aim at the bloody buggers. Ready? Fire!"

The volley went off very compact and Jurca was proud of it. 'How well they fire.' He peered through the breach in the wall. The Germans, taken by surprise, had immediately lain down, but as they were on the slope of the hill they offered a better aim.

"Fire!" called the old man. "Fire!"

The shoulder of Schwartz, who was next to him, started, struck by the recoil. Schwartz was trying hard to suppress his inclination to vomit.

"Don't give in, lad!" the old man said encouraging him; then he was sorry. Had he not done the same at his first attack? Even worse, he had filled his pants, but that was thirty years ago... Why, it had been about September too...

The Germans began firing. The bullets whizzed past and bit at the breastwork, and bits of brick flew on all sides.

High up, from the ridge of the hill, the soldiers came rolling down.

"Fire just as you think best!" said the old man, putting his automatic pistol to his eye. "But fire well!..."

When he heard the rumbling of the motor-lorry, he turned and saw it go through the gate and race away into town.

There were some hundred yards from the grove of acacia-trees, which the Germans had reached, to the wagons standing on the railway line. The moment they dashed forth, the machine-gun on top of the station started firing. Jurca saw three or four Germans roll down like balls, then the others retreated, firing as they ran.

From the left flank, where the wall turned a corner the shots were fired quicker. Now everything sounded like a drum beaten rapidly with the fingers. 'Let's hope they won't bring cannons, damn them, or we'll be done for.' He rose and ran towards the left flank. On the railway line there was an engine,and a German machine-gun stationed behind it was firing continually, so that one could not peep out from behind the fence.

Through a very small hole, just the size of an eye, Jurca saw that under protection of the firing some thirty men were approaching by leaps. When they reached the railway-line they lay down and started firing. A mechanic from the engine-shed said:

"Hey. I'll throw a grenade."

"Could you... so far?"

"Of course I can."

He tore away the fuse and, balancing the grenade in his hand, rose and hurled it. The next moment he bent and fell in a heap. The report of the grenade was heard, then the cries of the wounded. Jurca crept near him and lifted his head. He was dead. The machine-gun on the station-roof was silent too. 'What are those inside the workshop doing? Are they back, or?...' He did not finish his thought. A loud hissing noise split the evening air, then a Brand shell fell in the middle of the yard. Jurca threw himself on one side. A fair young boy near him twisted round, howled and leapt up. His arm was hanging down limp.

"Lie down, lie down!" shouted Jurca gripping him by his ankle.

Between the wheels of the goods train he saw the short top-boots worn by the Germans and the lower part of the Brand gun.

The worst of it was that he could not put out his head to fire. The young man was writhing beside him, biting his lips. Jurca swore dreadfully, then picked up his automatic pistol from the ground, thrust the barrel through the small aperture in the fence and made it wider. He aimed carefully, not taking any notice of the shells flying around him, then shot six volleys successively. He stopped and waited. Nothing but the sound of the shots. He took the pistol out of the hole and peeped out. Two soldiers were lying on the ground, he could see them very well, under the wheels of the train. The same moment shouts came from behind the engine and, their automatic pistols propped on their stomachs, a few Germans sallied forth. Then, from the window of the offices, the machine-gun started rattling again.

"Splendid! Bravo!" Jurca said rejoicing and rubbing his hands. "A soldier's a soldier. He didn't stay on the station roof when he saw he was discovered."

He went on shooting rapidly, changing the charges with deft fingers. He did not realize how time had passed: evening had come on and he was feeling very hot when he saw Şoldan walking towards him, bare-headed.

"Lie down! Lie down, man!" shouted Jurca, but the engineer was not listening to him. He was calling to him, his hands to his mouth.

"Ready, foreman Jurca? We've finished!"

A bullet buried itself in the ground near him and the engineer leapt aside so funnily that all the men round Jurca laughed. The Germans on the other side were silent. 'They're bringing cannons,' thought the old man. 'Let's be off.'

"Start from the right, to the boulevard. We're going towards the outskirts". He looked up at the roof of the offices. The flag was still waving.

Ten minutes later, along the ditch, there were but three men left and they were motionless. Old Jurca had taken on his back the wounded young man that had fallen near him.

In front of the factory, the lorry in which they had brought the ammunition was throbbing beside Dărnescu's car on which lots of men had climbed. Uncle Jurca jumped on to the footboard, and in the twinkling of an eye he saw Second Lieutenant Ionescu, his forehead wet with blood, bandaged with a shirt-sleeve, crouching by the machine-gun which he had placed at the rear of the lorry.

"I hope to goodness this rickety old car won't collapse on the way," the old man said.

"Ready. Everybody's up! Drive on!"

The moment the cars started, the Germans appeared through the holes in the demolished walls of the station. A tall officer, his sleeves rolled up, propped the butt of his automatic pistol on his stomach and fired several times after them. Schwartz, who had sat down on the margin, beat the air with his arms, called out something, then twisting round, fell on the asphalt.

"Wait!" roared Jurca, knocking with his pistol case at the driver's cab; the latter, however, had pressed the accelerator, and the lorry, rocking from side to side, drove off like lightning. The next moment it rounded a corner. Motionless, old Jurca gazed behind with wide open eyes. The wind hissed in his ears.

When they drove past the East barrier, they saw an enormous flame rising like a pillar of fire against the dark sky, and presently all the town was bathed in this yellow, trembling glare. Coils of smoke twisted and writhed.

Pressed close to one another, the crouching workers were silent. Their heads turned, they gazed at the blaze consuming the town.

"No matter. We'll come back," somebody said.

Whilst the last remnants of the rear-guard, soldiers dead tired, in tatters, black with smoke, were trudging along, dragging their weapons behind them, officers, bare-headed, riding without a saddle, and the civilian population pushing push-carts or perambulators were desperately racing along, the workers of the factory were advancing towards the East.

CHAPTER XV

Andrei could not realize how long they had run like that, blindly, stumbling and falling in the dark, like dolls knocked down by a cudgel. When they had sat down in a thicket that seemed lost in a pitch-dark hollow, surrounded on all sides by plaintive rustling, they both suddenly felt the piercing cold that froze their wet shirts. They sat quite still, afraid of making the slightest movement. After a long while Ardeleanu whispered:

"I'll go and gather a few armfuls of maize stalks for us to sleep on. We're safe now."

Andrei heard him going away. The darkness seemed oppressive. 'Why ever did I run away,' he was wondering disheartened... 'Why did I leave them there?'

'Andrei! Come! I've discovered a hay-rick. Come on, straight in front."

They collided. The mechanic was breathing hard.

"Why did..." began Andrei and then stopped short. He knelt and burrowed in the hay a place to sleep in. They both crept in. Andrei crouched, resting his chin on his knees and shivering with the cold. Gradually, a torpor came over him. He closed his eyes and saw again the road, the dust, the waggons, the sun which now seemed so far away. Ardeleanu put out his hand to find his.

"Try and sleep. We've far to walk."

"How far?" whispered Andrei.

"Well, they must be organizing a line of resistance somewhere. I don't know if you realize it, but the soldiers want to fight."

"I see."

"And then, the Red Army is near. We're going to meet it, so to say. You see, the people feel what way they must go."

"And after that?"

"Well, I'll enlist as a volunteer... Now go to sleep..."

His mind was weary with fatigue. Andrei thought: 'For so many years the Russians have been described in the most different ways, and lo! people are leaving their houses, their belongings, rather than stay under a German occupation. The people have an instinct which we have lost.'

When he awoke it was broad daylight. Ardeleanu had made a fire and was roasting maize cobs. Now only did Andrei realize how hungry he was. He stretched himself making his bones crack.

"We'll soon have to go," said Ardeleanu. "You know what I've been thinking? This night's tanks were only a patrol. We'll walk on. At Ineu we'll certainly meet your mother."

Andrei could not put on his shoes, his feet were too swollen. He laced the shoes together and hung them round his neck, and they set off. 'Yes, he's right. They must have got away. We're sure to meet them,' he said to himself, trying to compose himself.

The mechanic was walking quickly, his back slightly bent. With clenched teeth, straining every nerve and muscle.

Andrei was trying to keep pace with him, but, as he was unused to walking barefoot, his feet soon became even more swollen: a sharp clod scratched the sole of his foot, but he did not say a word. He felt however that he would soon be unable to go on. He kept staring almost mechanically at the clear sky in which a blazing summer sun was shining. They trudged along for a long time through the maize which was taller than a man, then crossed an unploughed stubble-field where Andrei fell down full length, as a thorn got into his big toe. Very late, when they were far from the spot where he had fallen, he noticed he had lost his shoes, but had not the strength to go back and look for them. About noon, without stopping, Ardeleanu handed him a maize-cob. They drank the water of a dirty little brook on which there floated long, greenish and murky threads of frog's spawn. 'How long is this going to last ?' Andrei wondered, but, as he found no answer, he endeavoured not to brood any longer. Now what they wanted was to get to the main road. He hoped he would meet his people and be able to lie down in Turculeț's waggon and, worn out, fall asleep, drowsy with the heat of the sun and the light rocking of the waggon. A few hours later they heard the creaking of the waggons and the distant cracking of whips.

"We've arrived," said Ardeleanu turning his sweating face towards him.

They started to run. When they came out of the maize-field, a village appeared before their eyes, and the road full of waggons wrapped in clouds of dust. At the very beginning of the village, on the edge of a dried-up pond full of sedge, a lot of waggons had halted. Some fires were burning and people were cooking their food. In vain did Andrei and Ardeleanu walk among them in search of some familiar face; when they inquired, they were told the people from Lunca had taken another road to Ineu. Andrei asked whether they had seen Turculeț, but he got no information. Nothing but waggons and people all over the place. Faint with hunger, they entered the courtyard of a more prosperous looking house, where they found half a company of soldiers black with dust, their clothes rent, sitting in the shade of some plum-trees, hungrily eating the still unripe fruit. They learnt that in the house

a captain, seriously wounded, was dying. Andrei sank helplessly on the trampled grass near the fence and closed his eyes. Every one of his muscles was sore. He heard the soldiers' conversation as though from very far away.

"For the moment one can't cope with them, they're so numerous... and then their tanks...".

"If we could only reach Ineu..."

"I've heard they kill the prisoners..."

"Damn them!"

Then the harsh voice of a non-commissioned officer was heard:

"Get ready!"

Without opening his eyes, Andrei listened to the clatter of the mess tins and rifles and to the footsteps in the courtyard. A woman's voice was shrieking wildly:

"And what are we to do with the officer? See, he's just died, poor soul. What are we to do with him?"

Andrei dozed off and, when Ardeleanu shook him by the shoulder, it seemed to him as though he had slept for quite a long time:

"Get up! We've got to leave. The people have started."

Andrei opened his eyes.

"I haven't managed to find any food," said Ardeleanu. "Everybody refuses to sell. Come on, Andrei, the cannons can be heard."

The march started again. Andrei now plodded along with closed eyes, as in a nightmare. Several times Ardeleanu had to drag him aside, for fear a racing waggon might run over him. His bleeding feet sank into the soft warm dust soothing him a little. In front of the church they stopped. The priest was selling dry consecrated bread and the soldiers crowded around him, swearing and fumbling in their pockets, but all in vain. The priest was a thin man wrapped in a grey hairy cassock. He squabbled with them:

"I can't let you have it for nothing sonny. The parish is poor and I too have got to flee..."

"Why, but..." shouted a sergeant-major of the reserve, irritated because the barrel of his machine-gun was crushing his shoulder, "you're a..."

"Weigh your words, my son, or I'll go and leave you here to starve."

They bought a few loaves of consecrated bread and went on.

A tributary of the Criș flowed right through the village and on this side of the bridge there was a frightful commotion: everybody was hurrying to be the first to cross the bridge, cracking his whip and swearing right and left. Other waggons, which had arrived later, after having tried to ford the river, had sunk into the mud up to the axles. A stout ruddy peasant, with a black, bristly moustache, was unable to get his loaded waggon out; it had stuck in the mud, while the horses, snorting and straining their necks, were groping with their feet in the sticky mire.

"Let's wade through," proposed Andrei.

They sank too, up to the kness, but managed to get across just as the banister of the bridge began to give way. A shrill cry resounded and a yellow gig rolled off the bridge and was smashed. Splashing through the water, Andrei and Ardeleanu rushed forward to lend a helping hand. One of the horses had been killed instantly, whilst the other was tearing at its harness, trying to get up. Andrei had just time to see its large, imploring dark-brown eyes; then he lifted up a fainting child whose leg hung limply from the knee. The owner of the gig, an elderly man dressed like a townsman, had fallen on his belly, a few steps farther away, and, after some effort, was able to rise to his feet. When he caught sight of his child, he howled: "Titi! My angel!" Splashing through the water, he pounced upon him, snatched him up from Andrei's arms and ran to the opposite bank.

"A doctor! A doctor!" he bellowed, the tears streaming down his face which had become a mask of wet mud.

Splashing through the water, a peasant had come near the debris of the gig and felt the horse's legs. Then he rose and said to Andrei:

"They're both broken. It's got to be killed to put an end to its sufferings." He turned and called to a lad who was motioning to him to hurry up: "Petru, bring the hatchet!"

That very moment the bridge cracked with a deafening noise and collapsed to one side. The waggons turned and started for the ford or even for places where the water

was deeper. Many were left sticking in the mud and Andrei heard the groans of the men straining to pull them out.

"Why didn't we stay at home?" a woman was crying while her husband was cursing and unloading his bemired waggon.

Wet to the waist, Andrei and Ardeleanu climbed up the other side of the road. A quiver passed through the crowd and cries were heard again:

"Come on, folks! They were just saying at the post office that the Germans are near!"

"Gee up, you brute!..."

Not far away, the men told them there was a railway line leading to Ineu, so Andrei and Ardeleanu decided to wait there for a train. Andrei feared he would no longer be able to walk and once urged Ardeleanu to go on alone. The mechanic turned his face upon him, a face that had grown thinner and was now covered with a thick black beard, and, withering him with a look, said:

"Don't talk nonsense! It won't take long now. There's sure to be a train soon."

It was only in the evening, however, that they reached the side of an embankment swarming with people who had unloaded their belongings from other peasants' waggons and were now waiting.

"How do you think you'll get in?" asked Andrei, lying down on the dry parched slope overgrown with prickly weeds.

"I'll get in all right. We'll both manage somehow."

Ardeleanu went to find some water. Left alone, Andrei let his eyes roam over the plain wrapped in a peaceful, gentle dusk. Far away, in the grey transparency of the sky, shone the silver eye of the evening star. Lost in the middle of this boundless stretch of land, Andrei pressed close to the soil that still kept some of the day's heat his hands dug deep into the gravel. His closed eyes seemed to be burning. And again he saw, as though in a kaleidoscope, the roaring road, the mad race of the past night. 'Why are we fleeing?' he wondered. 'Why didn't they give us arms?...' He remembered his uncle's words: 'Ah well, if we had fought against the Germans, every man would have gone willingly, every soldier...'

'No!' Andrei said to himself, 'we are no cowards. This fleeing mob might have formed an army...'

He drew a deep breath that did not seem to satisfy him, as if his lungs had not been large enough. He listened feverishly to the noises of the bluish plain, to the cries of the multitude whom he knew to be crowding all along the embankment; he was annoyed at his being lost in this gloomy immensity. He would have liked to do something... to fight... 'I am eighteen,' he thought, 'I am no longer a child. If we reach some line of resistance... then...'

From afar came a dim rumbling noise.

"The train!" someone cried out and immediately, as though obeying some order, a host of small lamps were lit.

"Put them out! The planes...!"

"Where are the planes?"

"Hush, don't shout!"

"Here's the train! Get ready!"

Andrei leapt to his feet and listened but could hear nothing but the whizzing of the telegraph and the chirring of crickets. Ardeleanu came running and handed him a flask.

"I bought it from a soldier. It will come in handy. Get ready. Take your time. Run along the train for a a while, then jump on to it."

"Alright."

Surprised at the sound of Andrei's voice, Ardeleanu stared at him. Far away, the engine was chuff-chuffing. Around them, everybody was shouting:

"How shall we get on it?"

"Get it to stop."

"D'you think it will?"

"Let's shout at it to stop!"

"Don't be a fool, woman!"

Andrei was stamping, irritated. Out of the darkness, quite close, the headlights of the engine appeared, glowing like red embers. The roar of the crowd became louder; someone was shrieking shrilly:

"Stop! He's been run over! Stop!"

When the first goods waggons passed, Ardeleanu leapt like a cat, caught on to it, calling Andrei all the time. The latter was running alongside the train: he collided with

someone who was running beside him, then, plucking up courage, jumped and his fingers gripped the side of the waggon. A callous hand caught him by the shoulder and pulled him up.

"You must be mad to leap up like that."

"Thank you," gasped out Andrei.

"Go to the devil!"

The carriage was packed. The men, lying down in serried heaps, were sleeping or talking under their breath, quite exhausted, Andrei made room for himself with great difficulty. He wanted to get more to the front, to where Ardeleanu was. The latter must certainly be worrying about him.

"Are you mad, young man?" someone said in a frightened tone when he stepped on to the buffer. "Stop, I tell you!"

Andrei went into the next carriage, but here he could no longer advance. Well, it did not matter, seeing they had both got on the train. They would certainly meet the next day. He made way for himself with his elbows and knees and managed to sit down on the dirty boards that smelt of sheep and soot. His head was ringing, but he only had one thought in his mind: to sleep, and nothing else; but he could not. A plaintive voice was muttering:

"Yes, it 's true... we're lost... The Russian offensive has been stopped. I've got information... The Rumanian army refused to pass over to the Russians and now we shall pay for it... A second peace like that of Buftea, but even more disgraceful and more burdensome, that's what we'll get... This chameleonic policy has ruined us... See, the country's destroyed, our homes scattered... We're refugees... and there's no finality."

"How do you happen to know all that?" asked Andrei rising to his feet with an effort and coming very close to his neighbour who made room for him. "How do you know it?"

"It's true... we're lost... lost... Oh, Lord!"

"Shut up!" snapped Andrei, "or I'll throw you off the train!"

A few voices rose threateningly:

"Quite so, he's right... why can't you hold your tongue?"

"Let's throw him off the train! He may be a spy!"

"Please... please... You must understand..."

'Where have I heard the voice before?' wondered Andrei. The murmuring soon subsided, drowned in the noise of the train. Presently, however, a quarrel broke out in the other carriage. Someone started singing in a thin, cracked, sneering voice:

The Marshal and our King Mihai
With maize-bread only us supply...

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, you fool?"

"Fool yourself!"

"How dare you make fun of His Majesty? I'll shoot you, you cur!"

"Now just listen to that!"

"Throw him out!"

"Wait a sec, good folk!"

"You ass, you've trodden on my toes!"

"Shut up, for God's sake!"

A few muffled sounds were heard, then the same defying voice rang out again:

The Marshal and our King Mihai...

"Shut up!"

"Oh! He's struck my arm with his rifle!"

"He's a soldier."

"That's why we have to flee as we're doing. Call that an army?"

"Shut up, or I'll smash your face. Don't insult the..."

In Andrei's carriage the same plaintive voice began again:

"Chaos... ruin... and you are angry when..."

Andrei was disgusted. He let himself slip down on the wet, dirty floor. Near him, smothered by a large heap of travelling bags and bundles, a woman was trying to comfort her child:

"Hush, darling... hush, baby!"

By the light of the match with which he lit his cigarette Andrei saw that the woman was young. She whispered to him:

"You did give that gentleman a bit of your mind! Since yesterday he's been going on, without interruption: 'Everything is in vain, we are lost. The Germans will catch us and kill us all...' "

But Andrei had fallen asleep, his cigarette burning in the corner of his mouth. The woman took it out gently and flung it out of the window.

That night the train stopped several times: once in a station where a furious crowd took it by storm, filling the carriages, trampling over everything; some men climbed on to the engine to kill the driver who had wanted to start the train. Another time it stopped right among the fields, for above it planes were firing their machine-guns. At daybreak Andrei awoke bewildered and frozen stiff. The woman had thrown an old coat over his back. Looking around, Andrei saw faces pale with fatigue, eyes with rings round them, bodies huddled together, luggage lying about pell-mell. From a corner of the carriage a man with a sallow face, whose hairy skin was stretched tight over the cheekbones, was looking at him. When their gaze met, Andrei's eyes opened wide: it was Suslănescu, all in rags, with a large red stain on the front of his torn shirt, his hair all ruffled and white with dust mixed with little bits of straw, grass and earth. Blushing and making a wry face owing to the pain he felt, Suslănescu rose to his feet, made room for himself awkwardly between the twisted bodies of the men still asleep, came near him and fell on his shoulder.

"Andrei!" he moaned. "Andrei, my dear, dear friend Andrei!"

It was the voice of the panic-stricken fellow he had heard in the night.

"Yes, sir, it's me!"

"Don't say 'sir' to me! We're good friends, aren't we, Andrei? We used to call each other by our Christian names. Have you forgotten? Oh, I am so happy to have met you! We'll travel together."

"Where are you coming from?"

"From the town. Oh, what a disaster! A real catastrophe." Panting heavily, Suslănescu tried to tell him everything at once, but only managed to stammer incoherent

sentences: "At Pîncota the tanks came across us. We were just fleeing. They fired right at us. Hundreds of men, women and children were run over by their caterpillar wheels. I don't know how I escaped..."

His features puckered up, his face covered itself with wrinkles, his chin began to tremble, and he burst into tears. Large tears, like beads, rolled down his face furrowing it.

"Why on earth? Why must we, the innocent, have to pay? Children, women... It's ghastly. Dreadfully inhuman... I've lost Mimi too. I think... she's dead... Oh!" he shrieked, quite overcome with grief.

The train stopped suddenly — the brakes had been put on abruptly and the people, pouring out of the carriages, tore across the field to hide among the maize. Low down, on the horizon, the outline of a Stuka plane with its swept-back wings appeared, flying straight at them. The woman beside Andrei picked up her child and jumped down awkwardly, holding on to the railing of the carriage with one hand only. Before Andrei had time to help her she rolled down over the sharp-edged stones, trying to protect her screaming child with her own body. Then she huddled up in the ditch, thrusting her child under her breast. When the plane drew near, Andrei jumped out of the carriage. There was no time to run across the field and hide among the grass. Skinning his knees until they bled, he crept under the carriage, crouching against the massive steel wheel. He still heard the noise in the field, then the growing rumbling of the hooter and the cracking of the machine-guns drowned everything else. A shower of stones fell on the train, striking the wooden walls of the carriages; the wheels rattled loud, a long whistling, gushing sound followed, the yell of a man, the plane swerved, then returned very low, the train shook and an explosion resounded in front. Long after the plane had flown away, vanishing in the clear blue morning sky, no one rose except Andrei. He crept out from under the carriage, tearing his trousers right down from the knees, and looked around. The shirts of the men made whitish patches on the green of the field. The boiler of the engine was riddled, and thin jets of steam were issuing from the holes that looked like

wounds. Not having any bombs, the pilot dropped a handful of grenades right on the engine-driver's cab and destroyed it. Then Andrei turned to look at the woman in the ditch. She was quite motionless. Under her blood-drenched shoulder was the smashed head of the child, the brains, the bones and fine locks of hair all mixed together. Andrei took a step back, staggered and remained rooted to the ground for a long time.

From all sides people came forward running and shouting. They made a circle round the smoking bits of iron, and Andrei had to struggle elbowing his way out of their midst. He caught sight of Ardeleanu who was shouting desperately:

"Andrei! Where are you Andrei?"

"Here I am," he cried waving his hand. "Here!"

Breathlessly, Ardeleanu hastened towards him and hugged him. His lips, bitten till they bled, were quivering.

"Oh, Andrei, I thought you hadn't managed to get on the train. I was just going to get down. And now... again... Oh, the fiends! That's what they did everywhere... In France, in Russia... They fired at the convoys. Oh, may they soon have war in their own country!"

The travellers had congregated around the ruined engine. The driver was turning about it, in bewilderment, kicking its wheels, spitting aside, in distress... Ardeleanu squeezed Andrei's arm and looked all around carefully.

"Who do you think is on the train?" he said. "Mitru Moţ, Andrei."

"Fancy that!" cried Andrei. "Where is he?"

They ran along the train until they found him. Mitru was flinging down luggage and travelling-bags, but when he saw them, he jumped down and shook Andrei by the hand. He was in field-service uniform, his chest covered with all kinds of brown straps, a helmet on his head and a knapsack on his back. Finally, he managed to recover speech:

"Andrei! Cousin! Oh, look where we meet! Dear me, dear me!" Then he added: "But what about old auntie and Ana and cousin Dan? Where are they?" Seeing the dark look in Andrei's eyes, he was scared and turned to Ardeleanu.

"They stayed on in the village. We'll tell you all about it. The rub is, what do we do next?"

"Well, first we'll sit down and fill our bellies," Mitru decided. "I've got some tins of preserves; they'll be just the thing. I don't know what we'll do for water. I've got wine in my flask."

Andrei was so pleased to have met him that he did not know what to do. He kept dancing around him, making a wry face whenever the sharp stones of the embankment cut into the soles of his feet. He tapped him on the shoulder, then threw his arms round his neck.

"Mitru, man, damn this bloody life!"

He had quite forgotten Suslănescu; when the latter, after looking for him terror-stricken among the wounded and the dead, had come upon them, trembling, Andrei blinked almost in astonishment and said:

"This is a master of mine from high-school. We met on the train."

Mitru examined him compassionately ('poor soul, in what a state he is!' he said to himself), then asked him to share their meal.

"*Merci, merci,*" stammered Suslănescu. He was starving and gulped a couple of times, in embarrassment.

They left the train around which people were bustling, weeping, running about from side to side, and went and sat down at the edge of a maize-field, on a stretch of ground covered with slightly faded yellow grass. While he was breaking the tin open with his bayonet, Mitru kept on a continuous flow of words:

"Oh, Christ, what I've been through! When I was called up, I was taken to Deva. There I took part in some kind of manoeuvres. We were about to leave for Jassy, when the 23rd of August and peace came. Then we were sent to the western frontier." He frowned and, lifting the greasy point of his bayonet, wiped it clean, carefully, with a crust of bread. "Our colonel fled over the frontier the very first day we reached it. He was afraid of the Russians, the fiend, for he had killed a whole village in the Ukraine. That's what the men who had been with him said. And he was afraid of his men too, for many had sworn they'd kill him in the first battle. We got no ammunition, we had no

guns or anything. We fought until dusk, God only knows how. A second lieutenant, who had been left to command the regiment, made us attack three times with our bayonets. What could we do? We drove away the infantry, then the tanks came on. The high-ranked officers betrayed us, that's what they did."

Suslănescu was eating hungrily, the gravy of the preserve running down his chin, and neck. He choked several times and hiccoughed. He broke off large bits of the loaf of brown bread shaped like a brick, but mouldy round the corners.

"Help yourself," said Mitru. "I've about another five tins. I took them from some dead mates," he said as though it were quite a usual thing to do.

"And what shall we do now?" asked Ardeleanu nodding towards the carriages on the line.

"I'll walk on and on until I reach some unit," said Mitru. "It's my duty."

Suslănescu gazed at him in dazed admiration.

"Where do you think we are?" asked Andrei. "And what direction shall we take?"

"Oh, well, towards the foothills. That's where Ineu is. You'll find a train there and be able to go further."

Mitru gathered up the scraps of food, heaved his knapsack on his back, laid his rifle over it like a yoke and cried:

"...ten... tion! Off we go!"

"By tomorrow at noon we'll be there, if we walk fast," said Ardeleanu.

For a time Andrei walked without uttering a single word. They crossed several stubble-fields. The bare, swollen soles of his feet hurt. The sharp edge of a broken cornstalk cut into his foot making him cry with pain. Mitru turned round, realized what had happened and, opening his sack, produced a dirty shirt with a stain of blood on one sleeve. He tore it into two pieces, called Andrei and said to him:

"Here, cousin, I'm going to make you some rag sandals."

He tied them round his feet with bits of cord and, taking a step back, appraised him admiringly:

"When these tear, we'll make others. I have some more shirts."

"From the dead?" asked Andrei trying to laugh.

"Of course. They're no good to them, anyhow."

Now that he was walking easier, Andrei kept his eyes on the indented summits of the foothills in the distance, but they did not seem to come any nearer; they even seemed to be farther away than they had appeared to be from the slope of the railway-line embankment. Suslănescu was hobbling along behind him and, sorry for him, Andrei turned to wait for him.

"And what about our friends, Lucian and the others? What happened to them?"

"I don't know," answered Suslănescu. "The Varga family left for Moneasa. Mr. Varga was nearly killed in his car at Pîncota. We just missed each other when we were to board the train. I lost Father Crăioc too... I don't know what it's all coming to. How long are things to go on like this? It's a disgrace. Why did we sign the armistice? Why? The consequences will be incalculable..."

"Last night I very nearly threw you out of the window for those words," said Andrei slowly.

Suslănescu turned pale.

"Was it you?" He bent his head and became silent.

At about four they halted, dead tired. They had some food and made cigarettes for themselves with maize stigma rolled in bits of newspaper. With eyes closed, basking in the hot sun, Andrei remembered that the first cigarettes in his life had been of maize too, which he had smoked a long time ago on the bank of the Teuz. That their people should not find them out, they had afterwards eaten a couple of onions each and brushed their teeth with sand.

Although tired out, Andrei rose as soon as Mitru gave the word of command. They walked down into a deep but gently sloping valley, at the bottom of which flowed a thread of blackish water. In front of them stretched the plain cut into plots by narrow lanes white with dry dust. When they had crossed the brook, Mitru stopped and proposed they should climb a lane going east. They followed him silently. Andrei was impatient and was trying to advance quickly but he could not keep pace with Mitru. The lane widened and by its side a hedge appeared, green and entangled.

"We're nearing a village," said Ardeleanu. "I wonder which village. I haven't the slightest idea where we are."

"We'll see," answered Mitru without looking back.

The lane meandered through plum-tree orchards, and the four men filled their pockets with fruit. The sun was beginning to slant towards the west in a blood-red iridiscence. No settlement was visible yet. 'I hope we haven't got lost,' thought Andrei. He was dragging his legs with difficulty; his muscles were burning hot. In the silence around them only Suslănescu's stertorous breathing could be heard. Dripping with sweat, he was walking mechanically, his teeth clenched. The sun had burnt the back of his neck, and he carried his head in a funny way, trying to avoid his neck touching the stiff collar of his shirt. When it was quite dark, Mitru turned and said in a voice hoarse with fatigue and dust:

"God only knows where we are. We'll have to spend the night here."

On the left there was a vineyard which they decided to enter. They jumped over a thorny hedge. Andrei tore his coat down the middle of the back. They looked in vain for some hut. At last they sat down on the grass, under a tall, leafy walnut tree. The leaves had begun to fade and fall, and there lingered a strong, bitter, pungent smell. After a while Mitru went and fetched an armful of branches and kindled a fire. The branches soon crackled merrily, and the smoke was also bitter and fragrant. They were all so dead tired, that they could hardly eat. Andrei, his elbows propped on his knees and his thin face cupped in his hands, was staring at the yellowish flickering dance of the flames, casting pale and fleeting shadows on his brow.

"Mitru," said Ardeleanu, "you remember the nights we spent together in my hut, don't you?"

"Of course I do," answered Mitru with a laugh. "What a lot of things we ploughmen could not understand! That's why the great and mighty did what they wanted with us. I haven't forgotten, Gligore, I assure you I haven't. And then, in the army and in the places I've been to, I saw so many things. Now we're only waiting for the war to be over."

"And how do you think it will be after the war?" Andrei asked.

Mitru who was cleaning his bayonet with a wisp of straw looked at him in surprise.

"After the war?" he asked in a drawling voice. "It will be different." He stopped, then said gloomily: "We've had far too much and far too many things to endure. Remember, the boyars dragged us out of our homes and sent us to the front. They taught us how to handle a rifle." He laughed hollowly, threateningly: "Take me, for instance. I've been holding my rifle for such a long time in my hand and, see, I've got used to it... This callous hand of mine has got used to it. But these callosities are different from those caused by the tail of the plough."

He looked strange, with his helmet pushed back, a helmet that looked like some cracked pot. With a sudden movement, he stuck his bayonet into the ground, up to the hilt. When he pulled it out, the blade shone with a silvery brightness. He looked at them in turn, as though to see if they had understood his parable.

"So you mean to make a revolution?" asked Suslănescu slowly.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea. Many soldiers I've spoken to thought the same."

"Did they?" asked Suslănescu staring at him. "And do you count on the Russians?"

"What does he mean?" Mitru asked Andrei.

"D'you rely on the Russians, for a revolution?"

"No, we rely on our bitter worries, sir," said Mitru softly. "There is a rumour that in all the world it will be different after the war. Since you've taken us from our natural way of life, we've changed too... You can no longer order a soldier who has seen death with his own eyes. You cannot... Look at me, for instance. Cousin Andrei knows I was a peaceful, decent fellow..."

"Well, not quite so," said Andrei with a laugh.

"Oh, well," added Mitru seriously, his forehead wrinkled, "I was wild in my youth but when I settled down I never did the least harm to anybody. No, not me. They took me from my home and drove me to the war. As soon as I get home, I'll go to Cloambeș and shoot him and Ioșca, his fat lump of a son, too. That's what I'm going to do," he said quietly, like someone who has often thought

of this and can speak of it now without passion, as though of something in the usual run of things.

"But don't you think that someone might kill you too? Some enemy, someone whom, unwittingly, you may have done harm to... ?"

"Why would he want to kill me? I've never done any harm to anyone; too many have done *me* harm. The time's come when they have to pay for it."

Suslănescu kept silent; he looked embarrassed. He put out his dirty hands and warmed them at the flames that were beginning to die. The dry bits of walnut twigs were still cracking.

"Yes," said Ardeleanu nodding, "we'll hit the bourgeois and the *grofs* * right on the head. That's what the Russians did in 1917. The world will change."

They did not say any more. They all lay down on their backs, looking at the sky.

The ground was cool. Mitru flung another armful of branches onto the fire, and the flames leapt up again, lighting up the space under the walnut-tree. His hands clasped under his nape, Andrei tried to fall asleep. 'The world will change,' he said to himself, repeating Ardeleanu's words. 'How it will change, I don't know... Maybe *they* do not know either, but they are waiting calmly for the change, as though waiting for a new season... Maybe after so much suffering, happiness will follow... Freedom... If we won't let ourselves be deceived... I suppose this is what people had thought of after the other war. But in their craving for life they forgot everything. The world is weary of heroes, of those who have sacrificed themselves.' He still heard the crackling of the branches, the flickering of the flames, the loud rustle of the drying leaves. The heat of the hot embers seemed to flow into him, through his feet, enveloping him.

He did not realize how long he had been asleep, when a timid hand shook him gently by the shoulder. He sat up suddenly, thinking it was morning and time to leave, but Suslănescu laid his hand on his mouth. Wide-awake

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* Count, in Hungarian; the name given to the boyars in Transylvania

now, Andrei saw the crooked silhouette, one shoulder higher than the other, standing out against the yellow, playful background of the fire.

"What's happened?" he asked in a whisper.

"Andrei," said Suslănescu sorrowfully, "I must speak to you."

His voice seemed full of such distress, so humble, subdued and imploring that Andrei could not be angry with him. He crept nearer the fire and took out a bit of newspaper to roll himself a cigarette.

"No, don't," whispered Suslănescu quickly. "I've still got four. I was keeping them for us. Have one."

They were sitting in front of one another, and half of Andrei's face was fully lighted. 'How he's changed since I last saw him,' Suslănescu thought sadly and maybe with a little fear, as what he had to tell him was suited to the former Andrei not to this strangely harsh face, with that deep line at the corner of the mouth, with sunken eyes and deep-cut furrows between the eyebrows. 'He's a man now,' realized Suslănescu frightened. He was sorry to have woken him up. Andrei stared at him impatiently and Suslănescu felt he could not back out.

"Andrei," he said, "what's going to happen?"

Andrei made no answer. Suslănescu toyed with his cigarette which he was breaking between his fingers.

"I should like you to understand me. I've listened to those two men... I don't even know their names. For them, all that will be is very clear, it is what has to be. I don't know if you've noticed this soldier's cosmic confidence. He will return home, he will kill. He will take the law into his own hands, and do justice. His justice. But Andrei, what about the justice of the man he means to kill? That is another justice. Which is ours, which is the justice of those who think? Yet another still. I am sorry to have woken you up, but I was so badly needing to speak to someone. So many things, about which I've had to be silent, seem to choke me."

He passed his hands feverishly through his hair. Andrei did in no way encourage him to go on.

'He's keeping an almost cruel silence,' thought Suslănescu. "I'm frightened for the future," he whispered.

"Why?" asked Andrei staring at him.

"I could not say... I don't know how the future will be, but I foresee so many new and terrible things for which no one is prepared. The new times have found us stark naked. The ideals of my youth are crumbling down with a thunderous noise..."

"What exactly were those ideals?"

The sarcastic tone of the question made Suslănescu start. He smiled sadly:

"I know what you mean. And you're right. I had no noisy ideals. Some call that cowardice, others wisdom..."

"And what does... your conscience call that?"

"My conscience?" asked Suslănescu shrugging his shoulders. "What has my conscience to do with all this?"

He stopped expectantly. But Andrei did not answer him.

"Yes," Suslănescu went on, "there are other dramas besides those generated by our everyday life. Obscure things that upset us..."

"And what exactly upsets you?" asked Andrei in the same even tone.

"I understand," said Suslănescu with a sad smile. "And it seems you've caught me contradicting my own words... You adolescents are so exacting. Inhumanly exacting. Maybe my drama consists of the fact that I cannot give an answer to the conscience you mentioned."

"O happy merchant!" said Andrei grimacing.

Suslănescu looked at him in astonishment. What did he mean?

"One day we'll call you all to account. All of you. Our most respected masters. What did you teach me? Pray, what? I knew that, when Napoleon surrendered on the Bellerophon, he was wearing the green uniform of a *chasseur* of the Guard. I only learnt lots of trifles... But I knew not why we lived like dogs, I felt it, but I knew not and understood nothing. It all seemed a huddle-muddle in my head, and it is the same now... I was disgusted by all that happened at school, in life..."

"I too, I assure you, I too."

"Then, why were you silent? You as well as the other 'thinkers' for which there must exist some special justice? How would you have liked to mould us?"

Suslănescu sat dumbfounded. He was wondering with fear: 'What shall I answer him ? What he is saying to me is quite unexpected...'

"Andrei, we used to be, and... I hope we are still good friends."

"I wonder, I am not so sure. Maybe we were tortured by the same thoughts, but we feared to speak of them to one another. Or was it... shame ? Or the caution of a merchant protecting his counter ?" He shrugged his shoulders. "All this made no sense. Now, facts alone... Forgive my speech. You are to blame for it." Stretching out by the fire, he said as though to himself: "Sometimes I feel like laughing at my own ridiculous gropings. Life was quite near me. People... I understood nothing... Things seemed to be standing on their heads. Good night... We have a long way to go tomorrow."

Suslănescu did not sleep all night. He walked about the vineyard, picked a bunch of grapes as sour as vinegar, which made his mouth sore, gathered dry wood and kept up the fire. About four, when the cold became sharper, he took off his coat and covered Andrei with it; then, in his shirt-sleeves only, lay down by the fire turning on one side, then on the other. Several times he was about to wake up Andrei to shake him and cry to him: 'What you said is inhuman? Don't you realize it ? It's only because youth is unyielding. Adolescence is a thirsting and inflexible age. For Goodness' sake, Andrei, do not let yourself be carried away by the impulsiveness of your eighteen or nineteen years. Don't let's accuse one another, don't let's look for those who are guilty. Let's close our ranks to meet the appalling age ahead of us... I am not to blame. What could I have done ? All this is nonsense, the nonsense of a young man who thinks that... Of course, you mean to change the world. Nonsense ... We 'll be taken to task... Nonsense... Then why this feeling of fear ?'

In order to get rid of these torturing questions, he tried to think of Mimi. Where could she be ? Most likely with some officer who would be driving her in his car and, at night, after having inspected how the troops had been quartered, he would come to her bed. A peasant bed full of pillows that would muffle up the sighs and the creaking... 'Why

did I not draw the conclusions of my mistrust in people, to the very end? I preferred passing for a fool, for a weak, helpless wretch. This must come to an end. I will change, exactly as the world has changed... I will be a blackguard if need be; I will get on in life, I'll climb right up to the top.' He wondered, in terror, from what depths of his soul such thoughts had sprung up, thoughts which a week ago would have appalled him. Maybe from his ancestors, from the powerful grasping boyars who, sword in hand, had... That was it. He knew how he ought to act from now on. 'To hell with all scruples, with honesty. They used to hit me, all of them, from all sides.'

He felt cold. He rose and went near Andrei and took his coat off the boy's breast. A flame shone brightly before going out and by its light he saw Andrei's features relaxed in sleep. He was smiling. He gazed at him for quite a while, as though to make out something in his face. No, he had to admit it, he did not understand him... 'How can one tell who is right? Each one of us in his own way, certainly,' thought Suslănescu, 'Oh God, have mercy upon us!'

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They left in the morning, after having washed in a puddle by the wayside. When Andrei took off his shirt, he found a louse in one of the seams. He showed it to the others with a laugh.

"I'm afraid it 's from me," said Mitru blushing. "...You understand... so many days at the front..."

"It doesn't matter," said Ardeleanu merrily. "Only the dead have no lice."

Suslănescu stood aside, avoiding Andrei's glance. He however tried stealthily to find in his face an answer to what they had talked about during the night, but Andrei, now rested, was fussing about impatiently.

"Come on, come on," he urged. "We'll wash when we get home."

After no more than one hour's walk, they entered a village named Buteni whose inhabitants were also getting ready to leave. An officer, who was looking for his company which had got lost during the night, told them that the Germans

were advancing fast, after having smashed the feeble lines of resistance at the frontier. On September 13, in the evening, the town had been occupied. From there a motorized column was advancing on Timișoara, while another at top speed, on Ineu. The defence had been hampered by the endless stream of refugees filling the roads and which were continually being riddled by German planes that dropped handfuls of grenades and mines which, in a crush, were more destructive than bombs. It was the same officer who told them that the Soviet troops were, according to certain information, near Lugoj, so that all this retreat would not last long now. Walking along the village road that meandered through vineyards, they saw a fight begin in the middle of a very large courtyard paved with yellow bricks. The master of the house was shouting that some four families of refugees, whom he had put up for the night, had stolen a large can of his, full of dried pears, and he was demanding they should pay for it. The men listened to his oaths and threats for a time but, when they realized they would never be rid of him, as he had ordered his servant to lock the gate, they went for him with their whips, beating him up dreadfully. Lots of people had assembled at the fence, looking on and shouting:

"Go for him, damn his eyes. He's so greedy, he never has enough!"

The man's wife, a tall, fat and handsome woman, lifted her arms up, calling for help:

"Hey, good folk, help, help! The low-down tramps are killing Ilarie. Why the devil didn't you stay at home? You've come like locusts to ruin us. Help, good folk! Help!"

None of the people standing by the fence made the slightest gesture; they looked on as if it were a show. In the courtyard, a tall peasant in a torn baize cloak, covered with scores of patches of all colours, was striking Ilarie with the handle of his whip wherever he could.

"How dare you call me a thief, you son of a bitch, you? D'you think I needed your pears?"

Finally, Ilarie, a short, sturdy and brawny man, dashed to the door of a wood-shed, whence he returned howling, carrying a hatchet in his hand. The men who had beaten

him ran away, only the tall peasant stood waiting for him. When Ilarie came near him, he caught him by the hand that held the hatchet. They both rolled down on the gravel.

"They're killing daddy!" cried a ragged urchin, the snot running down to his chin. In his small bony fist he was holding very tight a few dried pears. Then the other men came and separated them.

"He must... pay!" Ilarie was roaring, breaking loose from the men and splashing everything with the blood trickling from his nose. The tall peasant, who had beaten him and who now was as white as a sheet, rushed at him screaming:

"I'll pay you, you fiend... You just wait!"

When the scuffle in the courtyard had subsided, the four set out again. To reach Ineu, they still had to walk some fifteen kilometres, people said, so that they reckoned they would be there by noon.

Andrei would have liked to buy some fresh milk, but no one would sell him any.

"People here are like snakes," said Mitru in disgust. "They are prosperous, damn them. They have vineyards and every autumn sell at least fifteen to twenty hectolitres. Some are as rich as grofs, they're like dukes..."

On leaving the village they jumped over a fence into a vineyard and filled their pockets with large, juicy pears. When the watchman saw a soldier with a rifle, he threatened him with his fist from a distance, not daring to come near. Suslănescu had not wanted to go into the vineyard and refused a large bergamot, as soft and as yellow as wax, that Andrei offered him. Seeing him bite into it greedliy, his mouth watered and he started gulping. Finally, unable to contain himself, he said:

"Is it good ? Give me one too, please. I'm so thirsty."

"Why, of course," answered Andrei laughing.

It was a lovely early autumn day. On the hillock, a grove of poplars shone in the sunshine like as many copper arrows. Some pheasants crossed the road. The heated ground gave out a strong smell. A wind was blowing that had brought into the sky waves of white clouds, driving them southward.

About noon Mitru said they had better climb up the crest of the vineyards to see if Ineu was not visible from up there. High up, they halted wet with perspiration and breathless. In the distance they saw the highroad shining, with a stream of horse waggons flowing towards a townlet where, now and again, white houses peeped out from behind the opaque clouds of brick-coloured dust.

"So here we are at last," said Mitru, taking his helmet off.

They followed him and walked down through an orchard. All the way Suslănescu had tried to meet Andrei's glance, but the latter had stubbornly kept his eyes on the ground. 'Riddles,' Suslănescu said to himself. 'We are but the conventional symbols of some incomprehensible force, nothing else. Four people brought together by chance, a crossing of roads, no communication, with nothing to tell each other as though we were dumb. . .'

"Andrei!" he cried almost unwittingly.

When Andrei turned round in surprise, he motioned to him to come near him. He slowed down his pace that the others should not hear him, and spoke quickly, to pluck up courage.

"Andrei, I see you are worried. I should like you to know that. . . you may depend on me. You need not be afraid of anything. ('What rubbish I'm saying,' he said to himself.) "From here we'll take the train and go on. I've money on me. . . and. . ."

"What makes you think I'd like to go on?" Andrei asked.

Then only did Suslănescu look at him closely: in Andrei's eyes something strange was smouldering, a dim dangerous flame.

"I don't get you," he said at a loss.

"Oh Lord. But why?" He remembered the insistent way in which Andrei had asked where the lines of resistance could be, and then he suddenly grasped the meaning of Andrei's words. "Have you thought it all over?" he whispered.

"Yes, I have."

'What could I say to him? And, after all, why don't I leave him alone?' He remembered Andrei's paper at

school, all that had happened, and he blushed as though Andrei could have read his thoughts. 'Yes, I am dreadfully to blame. That is why . . .'

"Dear me, Andrei, of what consequence do you think your contribution will be?"

Andrei turned to him so suddenly and angrily that Suslănescu feared he would strike him.

"Can't you understand it's not my contribution that matters. I simply must do it... for my own sake."

'An idealist,' thought Suslănescu, but he only asked him:

"Why?"

Andrei smiled a fleeting smile. Suslănescu was looking at him with painful curiosity. He would have liked Andrei to be unable to answer him.

"Could you tell me what the homeland means for you?"

Suslănescu started and stopped, in amazement. As Andrei did not wait for him, he took a few quick steps, then walked alongside him. He too had asked himself the same question once, on the day when Vîslan had spoken about the German commission and had asked him to write a pathetic article for his paper. How far away that seemed. And now, the same question... But in what circumstances ...There was no shirking it now...

"No, I couldn't," he said panting. "I could not tell you."

"Funny," answered Andrei grinning. "In class you spoke with such emotion..."

"Oh..." muttered Suslănescu," in class." Then, realizing that with those words he was creating a dreadful impression, he tried to collect his thoughts: "The homeland," he said. He almost wept with impatience and vexation. "Is this general notion very relevant?"

Andrei sighed and turned towards Suslănescu:

"You see, there is no sense in my explaining to you. I've always felt a stranger... I don't know why... I should never forgive myself if I did not do now what I think I ought to do. I am ashamed that we, able-bodied people, are running away like a herd of..."

They soon came out on the highroad and were engulfed in its bustle and noise. The nearer they got to the

entrance of the town, the greater the crush. The waggons edged their way through the anti-tank obstacles with difficulty. Every village had the same kind of screen: thick wooden poles stuck in the ground and a zigzag basket-work fence with the help of which they would stop the tanks. To the left, the slope of a foothill, on the top of which the building of the military academy glittered in the sunshine. Soldiers were bustling around its walls, and bomb-proof shelters and dug-outs were being prepared.

"Now we'd better put up somewhere, have a wash and get some food. Then I'll go and find my military unit," said Mitru who was walking at their head, wending his way through the crowd like a serpent.

They turned into a narrower lane bordered with very leafy acacia-trees. The houses were large and beautiful, with wooden verandahs painted brown, red or blue, and the walls adorned with coloured tiles. Above the heavy oaken gates, the initials of the masters of the house could be read as well as the year when the house had been built.

"This is no doubt the innkeepers' lane," said Mitru.

The gates were locked and groups of refugees were pacing about, fuming with rage.

"They won't open, damn them..."

They stopped in front of a strange building, at the same time with a number of waggons. It had thick walls and a sort of tower supported by brick buttresses. On the pediment there was a bent piece of grey tin bearing the words: "Come to me all ye that are weary and burdened, and I shall give ye rest."

After knocking without avail for a time, a few peasants started breaking the gate open with their axes. Then the creaking of a bolt was heard and a middle-aged man, bald, ruddy and with squinting eyes close to the bridge of his nose, appeared at the gate, roaring:

"Get away from there! What do you want there? This is the pentecostal temple. You can't come in... Go away! Who called you here?"

He was answered by a chorus of oaths:

"Just listen to him. We've been on the way for six days..."

"A temple!"

"Stand aside!"

"Stop!" cried the man, "you can't come in." Then he stood aside to make room for a ragged skeletal old man with a dirty yellowish beard spread out all over his chest. The latter raised his arm: a wide sleeve slipped back, uncovering his arm that looked like a knotty stalk covered with white hairs. All those present were silent. The old man opened the black hole of his mouth and roared like a trumpet:

"Run, people, verily I say unto you run, for lo, the ninth hour will strike, bringing the blast and a shower of blood, as foreseen by the books... For no one knows which is the hour and when it strikes, except the old... And this night in my sleep I saw a tall old man, and blood ran from his eyes, from his hands and feet, and he was dressed in gold garments splashed with blood... and said... run... And I spoke to him in various tongues, about many things..."

"This is Izrail Trifuţ, of Gurba," someone whispered. The saint..."

The crowd had now filled the lane.

Then a peasant whipped up his horses and drove straight through the gate. The old man leapt aside and the following moment the courtyard of the temple filled with people screaming and jostling one another. The gate of the adjacent house was opened too and all rushed to the well. Standing on the raised verandah, the old man kept cursing and spitting like a tom-cat.

"He's a saint," someone explained to Andrei who was looking at the old man curiously. "He's been to America. He came back from there a saint. He cures diseases. He's very rich, some say, but lives only on what people bring him, and they bring him all kinds of things, as he has great power in making cows yield milk. He has the gift of speaking in many tongues, believe me..."

After some time, their turn came to wash at the trough, among the greedily drinking cows and horses. Ardeleanu went into the house to get some food, but no one would open the door for him. From the window, the old man was thundering wildly and threatening with his fist.

After eating some of Mitru's tinned food, they looked for a place to rest. The large yard of the temple was full

of people and noise. They took refuge somewhere at the back, beside a bushy hedge. The sunshine of this autumn afternoon was soothing. Andrei felt it on his chest, like the light caress of a living being. He closed his eyes, overwhelmed by the kindly, all pervading warmth. There was a smell of dry grass und burnt leaves... He felt his eyes fill with tears.

He had always been ashamed of the sudden emotion he sometimes felt, as though it were a sign of weakness, but now he was merely happy to be alive. All this would pass, and life would begin anew, people would meet, as though after some long separation... This very moment, scores of kilometres away, on a highroad wrapped in the dusty and overwhelming sunshine of this belated autumn day, Sonia was...

'I never told her anything about myself... I was expecting some stupid miracle to help us to know one another without words... Maybe because it was the easier way, or maybe because I was afraid. So far, in spite of all our lofty preoccupations, we've only managed to be useless, perfectly useless.'

Towards evening, Ardeleanu came back with news. The town had fallen. The Germans and the Hungarians were nearing. In the morning they reached Gurba. The military academy was getting ready to resist, people were being taken to dig trenches and bunkers.

"I'm not going any further," he said to Andrei. "I'll wait for the Soviet army here."

"Alright," answered Andrei. "I'll stay also."

Ardeleanu cast a long glance at him and said nothing.

"Andrei," said Suslănescu weakly, on hearing their words, "don't be rash." He turned towards Ardeleanu and said: "Why do you want to keep him here? Don't you see he's only a child? Will you take the responsibility towards his parents?"

Ardeleanu coughed; he seemed embarrassed. Andrei paid no attention to Suslănescu's words, as if he had not heard them.

"I'm staying, that's final."

"Then," said Ardeleanu. "let's go and have a rest. I've found a hay-loft in the neighbouring courtyard. You may come too, sir."

They woke up Mitru, jumped over the fence, mounted a shaky ladder up to a high loft. Mitru fell asleep immediately, as though a thunderbolt had struck him. Andrei lay down next to him.

When he awoke, everything was steeped in darkness. Because of the strong smell of the hay, he had got a headache. He had a bitter taste in his mouth, and his tongue felt swollen and sticky. He stretched himself. The hay made a long rustling sound. Something had wakened him up, but he did not know what it was. From outside came shouts and bangs, and a sharp youthful voice rang out:

"Come, come now, my man, don't argue. Those are my orders, there's no use talking."

"Why, sir, but I'm. . ."

"Shut up! Go ahead! Orders!"

They wakened Mitru too.

When they went down the shaky ladder, they saw in the lighted courtyard a cadet from the military academy, with a note-book in his hand, hastening on the men assembled around him.

When he caught sight of them, he stopped for a moment in surprise, then went up to Andrei.

"Are you refugees?"

"Yes."

The cadet examined Andrei's face by the light of his lantern and said in a milder tone:

"You'll have to come and work. The enemy troops are not far away now."

"Alright," said Andrei. "Where are we going?"

"You'll come with me," said the cadet, very pleased. "We still have to get the men out of three or four houses, then we'll make for the place where the emplacements will be set up. Come on, my good man, stop haggling, he said turning towards the squint-eyed man who had tried to prevent the refugees from entering the courtyard of the temple. "I'm in a hurry and you must come along with me. Bring shovels and spades. . . Quick, march!"

Then Mitru, who had in the meantime buttoned up his tunic, stepped out in front of the cadet, put his hand to the visor of his helmet and said in a soldierly way:

"Good afternoon, sir. My name is Dumitru Moţ of the Deva 14th light infantry regiment. I lost touch with my unit during the retreat."

"Have you? Alright, come along with us. You'll join my unit. Have you got a rifle?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent. Let's get on.

After stopping at some four houses where they had encountered the same resistance or excuse — 'I'm ill, sir, you see I've got the jaundice. I can hardly move, my spleen's so swollen'—they set out for the end of the village, meeting on their way other groups of villagers carrying spades, shovels and pick-axes on their shoulders.

The cadet said to Andrei:

"We'll resist until the Soviet troops arrive. This morning we were sent four guns, for which we'll have to dig the emplacements this very night. There are some trenches still unfinished. I think that tomorrow morning at dawn it will begin... Ever since the Germans attacked us, we've been waiting to be sent to the front line. Now it's different. They've actually invaded us and we 've got to beat them, although we know that for the moment they are superior to us, both in number and armament. Their attack proves they're desperate. Since Stalingrad they've been unable to stop the Russians, so, how will they be able to do it now?"

He also told Andrei that the military academies everywhere had resisted very well, especially at Lipova where the Germans had only been able to pass after the number of the cadets had been reduced to a quarter. The cadets had beaten an orderly retreat and had formed a detachment of partisans, together with about one hundred workers of the town. The day before, a second lieutenant had come from there for orders and said that terrible things were happening: a German column had been annihilated on the highroad from Timişoara, arms and ammunition had been captured, the cadets had blown up a train and, to cut a long story short, the lads had behaved splendidly.

"We too shall put up a good fight. The commander of the school, Lieutenant-colonel Maxineanu, Biţă, as we call him, is a splendid, an extraordinary fellow. When he starts swearing, a trooper would envy him... He is quite a character. A real officer. And he's never been able to stand the Germans. The men who were with him in Russia say that at Sebastopol he shot a German officer and, during the retreat, when a German lorry refused to take a few wounded, he ordered his men to open fire on it. He's terribly strict, never pleased with anyone, but with such a man one always feels safe. He got badly wounded in the face and looks like a monster, but, after a time, you don't even notice it."

"Listen," said Andrei coming closer to him and talking into his ear, "couldn't I have a rifle? You see... I d' like to..."

"We'll see about that," said the cadet warily. "We'll see."

They were out of the village now and were walking in silence along the bank of a pond reflecting the stars flickering in the clear sky. From a dark thicket of willows, as though from a curtain of darkness, came the boisterous croaking of the frogs. Andrei turned round and heard the footsteps of the men who were working in the soft ground. Here and there a cigarette glimmered, or the clattering of a spade hitting against another was heard.

"This way, this way," said the cadet walking ahead.

They climbed up the slope on all fours, then down the other side among the trees, crashing into them, getting their feet entangled in weeds, stumbling at every step. They heard voices in front of them. The cadet cried:

"Detachment... stop!" He vanished in the dark; his voice alone was heard, saying officially:

"I've brought the detachment, sir."

"Alright," roared a thunderous voice, "alright! You've been at the saints' place, haven't you? Hope you hustled them! Very good! They ought to have flocked here, damn their bloody temple. They ought to have come and begged for arms, confound the lot of them. Alright, let's begin now. Captain Popescu, show them where the emplacement for every howitzer will have to be dug. According to re-

gulations. Got me? Cadet Scorţan! Where are you, Scorţan? Oh, youre there? Come with me to the observation post. Take ten men along. March!"

"Andrei," said a voice at the rear.

"I'm here. What is it?"

Mitru came near him, stopped for an instant, took him in his arms, pressing his hairy, prickly face against his.

"I'm off," he said. "I'm off. So, good luck, and I hope we'll meet again soon... If you go home, give Floriţa my love and tell her not to worry. Good luck, cousin... Have... take these... they may come in handy..." And he gave him three tins of preserves, then hugged him again and vanished in the dark.

Andrei turned towards Ardeleanu, with a heavy heart. The latter was leaning on his spade and gazing after Mitru.

"What a capital fellow! When he is back in the village, he'll be of great help, to be sure."

"And now let's get to work!" someone called.

The soft, broken-up ground was easy to dig, but they soon came across a layer of stone and had to take their pick-axes. Andrei soon felt his shoulders ache, but he went on digging with a grim sort of stubbornness. Now and again an officer would come along, light a lantern, cast its light on the digging and order them to round it off and be careful it be exactly half a metre deep, seven in diametre, with a niche on the right and left side.

The men were working in silence. Their heavy breathing and the sharp sound of the spades in the ground were the only sounds audible. They gradually felt warmer.

"They're sure to come to grief right here," someone said with a laugh.

"What'll they do when they meet the Russians?"

"Oh, they'll even throw away their togs, to run faster... I've seen them doing it before..."

Now and again Ardeleanu would ask:

"How are you getting on, Andrei? Take a rest and I'll do the digging."

Andrei shook his head. Yes, that was the thing: to do something, to feel you were a particle of one great effort. He struck the ground almost merrily.

About one in the morning a field-kitchen distributed to them some hot, thin soup. Andrei thought he had never tasted anything better.

The sky had turned milky-grey when the last trenches were ready. The men set out for the village. Andrei and Ardeleanu leant against the trunk of a tree, beside a few soldiers, and shut their eyes. It was here that Suslănescu found them. He had been looking for them everywhere. He took Andrei's hands and begged him for the last time to come away with him. A lieutenant, who was driving a lorry to the rear for ammunition, had kindly offered to take him and his "brother" in the car.

"I told him you were my brother, Andrei," said Suslănescu.

Without rising from the ground, Andrei held out his hardened hand on which blisters had appeared; they smarted terribly.

"Pleasant journey and... good luck...!"

Then Suslănescu bent down towards Andrei, lifted him up by the hands, took him aside a few steps and whispered:

"Andrei, I quite understand you. No, I don't... But... I can't help it... I must however tell you something. Please listen to me. That paper of yours, you remember, that paper... It was I who took it to the Head of the school... I did... I was frightened... I know it was a caddish thing to do... I am telling you this to get you to hate me... me, Suslănescu... You ought to hate me. You have every right to do so. I've given you a reason, but do not extend your hatred, do not generalize it to all. You're young, sensitive. You've fallen under the influence of this fellow Ardeleanu who is a communist, isn't he?"

Andrei kept silent; he felt weary.

"I know, I understand. But I believe in you. You'll judge things in the right way... Andrei, you despise me, don't you?"

"You could not have helped it," said Andrei.

For a short while, Suslănescu thought this was an excuse, then he understood.

"I won't ask you to forgive me... God bless you, Andrei!"

He walked away, his shoulders bent.

Later, seeing Andrei and Ardeleanu squatting under a tree, a soldier called to them to come to him.

"It's full of ammunition cases. You may sleep on them. Here's a horse rug, so that you won't freeze to death. But mind you don't smoke, or we'll be blown up."

Never had a bed seemed softer to Andrei than the shell-containing case of rough boards.

CHAPTER XVI

The battle began about ten o'clock in the morning. The German and Hungarian columns were advancing in march-formation along the highroad. At first the rumble of the lorries and motor-cycles was heard very faintly from far off, filling the valley with their haunting monotonous drone. The artillery section was wrapped in a strained silence, like the stifling of an immense breath. Towards morning it had been very cold; the leaves of the trees, the grass, were cold and damp. A bird trilled gaily in a hazel grove, then the telephone buzzed and the operator's voice shaky with excitement was heard:

"From the survey... left 0-15... foresight 54... ground angle 0-0-2... one charge... fire!"

From behind the grove where they were kneeling, chilled by the dampness, their hearts throbbing quickly, dully, Andrei and Ardeleanu were following the jerky movements of the gunners: a cadet jumped to the gun, checked the sight and, raising his hand, shouted with all his might:

"Fire!"

The barrel wrenched itself backwards, the report burst deafeningly and a metallic noise rushed upon the thicket, shaking the leaves. Stunned by the noise, Andrei thought that his ear-drums had burst. From right and left two charges started almost simultaneously. The prolonged echo roared in the valley. Far away several muffled shots resounded. The gunners shouted: "Hooray!" Out of the niche came the telegraph-operator's voice:

"Foresight 55, four charges, quick fire..."

Ardeleanu shouted something, but Andrei did not hear him. The reports succeeded one another furiously, without interruption. An acid, sickening cloud of gunpowder spread out. The gun leapt, digging its trail into the earth; the empty, burnt brass-tubes shot out of the barrel, ringing as they came against the cast-iron sides.

Andrei was so stunned that he could not keep quiet any longer. He got up and took several steps, swaying as if he were drunk. The cadet who was conducting the firing perceived him with alarm and was at his side in a leap, gripping him tightly.

"What are you doing here?" he asked trying to disengage his pistol from its case. "What are you after?"

"I'm a refugee!" screamed Andrei to make himself heard. "I've been digging here last night."

And quickly, so as not to give the other time to put in a word: "I'd like to help. May I?"

The cadet scratched his forehead in embarrassment, and then said harshly:

"Take the bucket and water the section. There must be no dust... We mustn't let them discover us."

Andrei snatched up the bucket, spilt half of the water on his feet in his hurry, and began to sprinkle it about. One could not stay near the gun: the din was so great, as if enormous glass-sheets were being broken. The gunners were so hot that they had taken their tunics off. A young soldier carried the shells in his arms as carefully as if they had been as many piglets. Everybody was shouting,. but nothing could be heard. In the midst of the deafening noise, the soldiers seemed to be mute dummies.

"Stop!" the telephone-operator shouted. "The planes! Take over!"

Andrei stopped with the bucket in his hand, deafened by the silence that followed. The cadet leapt into the section and began to scatter the empty tubes kicking them about. A swarthy sergeant pulled a net over the gun, then they all jumped into the pits dug close by. The commanding cadet pulled Andrei by the hand:

"Come on, man."

Now, the clatter of the machine-guns could be heard clearly, the shots following in an uninterrupted succession. The air shook, stirred by the buzzing of the engines. Andrei leapt into the deep, narrow trench and squatted against the earthen wall. 'How many times have I done so already?' he wondered when the hooter of the plane began to wail heart-rendingly. A shrill whistle, a short moment of silence, then the stricken earth quaked, while splinters flew through the foliage, and a rain of clod, stones and chopped up earth was showered upon the trees. Andrei closed his eyes and clenched his fists. 'If only they would not spot us!' the choked voice of the cadet was heard. He took his cap off. His hair wet with sweat was sticking to his pale forehead. There were four of them in the pit. The swarthy sergeant listened tensely but calmly. Then, when the second shell burst a little farther off, he laughed, showing a row of very white small teeth.

"It'll soon be over. They don't know where we are. How many of these I have seen! Who's got a cigarette for me when the planes have passed?"

"I have, Sergeant," mumbled the tall lad who had been carying the shells, "I have even two if you like."

The whistling was heard again, like the passing of a blade through a giant cloth. Andrei clung more closely to the earth.

"Oh Lord!" whispered the cadet.

The bomb fell close by and broke a young hazel-bush, throwing it up into the air; the earth groaned and fell over them. Andrei swallowed dust, began to cough and choked, tears welling up into his eyes.

"This was meant for the second section," the sergeant commented. "But what are you, a civilian, doing here?"

Much later did Andrei dare to look up, just as the plane was flying above them, very low: he saw the en-

gine's grey belly, the wings striped with yellow, the sinister black cross bordered with white, and the reddish flashes of the side-guns which were shooting into the clearing at random. From behind came a suffocating black cloud.

Andrei would have been unable to say how long the bombardment lasted. Every time the plane swooped down upon them, he cowered as if he had wanted to sink into the earth, with the sensation that he had nothing above his head; later, when the echo of the explosions had died down, he was aware that he had been holding his breath and was about to suffocate. In the short lulls, the reports of the battle down in the valley could be heard; short explosions, shots and a monotonous disturbing grinding.

"There's the tanks," the sergeant said. "they've got tanks too... damn them... there is no denying it..."

The shadow of the plane passed again and the following moment the young soldier jumped out of the trench screaming. The sergeant had barely time to catch him by his leg, when the explosion thundered and the shell splinters whined, tearing the tree tops. The soldier fell limply into the pit: a deep cut was yawning in his throat. The blood was gushing out in thick purple waves, reddening his shirt, wetting the sergeant's hands; then it ran down along the earthen wall which drank it in like a greedy sponge.

A cold, vicious claw dug into Andrei's chest; he groaned several times, biting his pale green lips. The silence was more ghastly than the previous noise; time seemed to have melted into a dead hollow. Then the engines of the tanks were heard, and the sharp, continuous puffing of an anti-tank gun firing shot after shot.

"What are you doing here?" somebody yelled from outside.

Lifting their eyes, they saw on the edge of the pit two gigantic top-boots. They jumped out of the pit. An officer in his shirt-sleeves, an over-sized helmet shading his forehead, with only the horrible scar visible on his smashed chin with its bruised bones, was gesticulating with an automatic pistol:

"You've been digging yourselves into the hole as in your mother's womb. The tanks will soon be over you, you bloody fools!"

The soldiers rushed to the gun, while the officer was bellowing, choking with fury:

"Get it out of the section. Out with it! Direct fire. Cadet Mureșan!"

"Yes, sir."

"You are to destroy them, d'you understand? I'll bring in the reserve. Take your orders from Captain Popescu, Carry on!"

The telephone-operator was desperately turning the handle of his apparatus, calling into the mouthpiece:

"Criș! Criș! Do you hear me? This is Mureș... Criș... Criș... do you hear me?" Then he turned his distorted face towards the officer: "I can't get in touch with them."

"Do you want me to help you do it?" the latter shouted and dashed off with big strides.

The sergeant took his thick hairy tunic off and said:

"I'm off to see what's the matter with the wire... Get the gun out."

All rushed to the big heavy wheels and began to push. Andrei put his hand on the gun and drew it away with a cry. It was burning-hot. Three times the wheels glided back, while they strained all their forces, their eyes bulging from their sockets.

"Sir, sir! Gun number three has been destroyed. What are we to do? Cadet Crișan and the gun-marksmen are dead. The ammunition is safe."

"You there! Hey, you!" the commanding cadet said shaking Andrei. "And you too..." he turned to Ardeleanu whose face was covered by a thin coating of mud, "go with Burghelea and fetch the ammunition. It is away back there."

The telephone-operator repeated in the mouthpiece:

"Criș... Criș... Criș...!"

Scratching his hands and face, Andrei rushed blindly through the groves of trees. The smoke was hanging in folds from the broken branches; it floated suffocating and black like a cloud, above the coppice. Everywhere the earth was turned up; the peeling, broken trunks of the trees looked like bones picked clean by rooks. Andrei ran saying to himself: 'If only we could bring the ammunition in time!' and beckoned to Ardeleanu to hurry up.

The latter distorted his face into a kind of smile. Andrei stumbled. At his feet there lay a young cadet, his fair hair ruffled round his temples. He had fallen on one side. His shrivelled hand was grasping tight a broken field-glass; his eyes, open, blue and hazy, seemed unspeakably sad. Further away, out of a half-filled hole, a leg broken off from the knee was protruding, the cloth of the trousers all black and burnt. The gun had not been touched in full, but the splinters had smashed its sights, and the shield was riddled like a sieve. Its muzzle was thrust into the earth. Lying on one side of the gun-carriage, a fat soldier seemed to be looking for something with hands stretched and fingers spread out. A corporal, the blood streaming down his face, called to them:

"The ammunition! Here!"

Without waiting for them, he dashed into a thicket. They followed him.

Andrei leapt into the shallow pit, on top of the wooden cases, and caught hold of one. It was very heavy and he nearly let it drop.

"Wait, let me help you!" Ardeleanu called out, but Andrei with an effort lifted it on to his shoulder.

The sharp edges crushed his skin, and it seemed to him that he heard his collar-bones creak. Staggering, swaying backward and forward at every moment, unable to keep his balance, he started at a run, thinking: 'If I let it fall, I'll be blown to atoms.' His legs had gone weak all of a sudden, and they were wobbling. When he reached the section, the salty sweat had blinded him. He put the case down and hastened back. His temples throbbed almost to bursting point. With a prolonged wail, something passed above him; then he heard the thundering of the gun which had begun to fire straight at the tank. Andrei carted three cases more, then dropped down on the grass, exhausted. He laid his wet face close to the cold ground. After some time he looked up. Before them, on the strip of field that could be seen in front, the tank, firing without interruption, advanced continually in a bluish-white cloud. His eyes bulging, Andrei looked at it fixedly. He tried to get up and run away frantically, anywhere, as long as he could escape this monster advancing on them. Several shells

exploded around the tank. The tank stopped and turned its turret about, looking for its opponent.

"Stick to the ground!" a soldier shouted, throwing the chest down from his shoulder and taking cover behind it.

At that very moment, just beside the tank, a nimble shape appeared, raised its hand, threw something, and a grey smoke drowned everything. Then a reddish-green flame gushed up. The cadet jumped to the gun, aimed carefully and when the smoke dispersed, the blow went off precisely. The tank began to revolve, and a torn caterpillar unrolled itself like a long black tongue.

"That was Maxineanu!" the swarthy sergeant shouted, sitting next to the gun and tying up his puttees. "Fire, don't wait," he shrieked, "the gunners are coming out."

But the cadet looked at the burning tank through his field-glasses and waved his cap, mad with joy.

They pushed the gun back to its emplacement. The telephone from the observation post answered no more. After a time a platoon of cadets, their arms trailing, passed them. An elderly reserve second lieutenant was trying to run in front of them, but was continually being left behind. From him they learned that four other German tanks were forcing the road towards Ineu, while the Hungarian hussars were trying to envelop the flanks.

The baffled commanding cadet began to bustle about. Presently a messenger arrived from Maxineanu. They were given orders to retire immediately and take up a position at the edge of the village.

They loaded the ammunition on the waggons, then the horses were brought along, snorting restlessly.

"Climb up, civilian," said the sergeant pushing Andrei up. "Climb up."

Lashed savagely, the horses dashed through the clearing, past the destroyed position, where the men picked up two wounded soldiers, crossed the meadow and entered the deserted village street. Looking back, Andrei saw that the whole coppice was wrapped in smoke, while high up on the hill the building of the military academy was all in a blaze. Out of the trenches, which had been dug there during the night, the little white cloudlets of the shots rose in rapid succession.

"There are many of them," Ardeleanu said frowning. His whole face was black with soot, and he was biting his lips. ". . . Yes, it's easy to fight several hundred men when you've got tanks. Just you watch them running like rabbits, as soon as the Russians come!"

"You bet!" said the sergeant with a laugh. "Don't I know them?"

They stopped in the market place und uncoupled the gun, placing it so as to face the road.

The sky, that had been as clear as glass, was now covered with a thin film of clouds, from behind which the sun, as if extinct, cast its dim beams.

Andrei lay down in a ditch. His head was burning, his wheezing, hot breath scorched his dry, chapped lips. Ardeleanu handed him a lighted cigarette, but he did not feel the taste of the smoke he was greedily inhaling.

On the road there appeared the first echelons retiring in good order; the soldiers were covered with dust, soot and mud. On many of them their torn uniforms were hanging like rags. Andrei saw there were several wounded among them; a young chap about his own age, his face livid and dirty, was being carried on the back of a fat perspiring sergeant-major. From the wounded man's shoulder a stream of blackish blood was trickling down. The soldiers were passing at a run under the acacia-trees. Then the second gun appeared. The gunners were riding bareback, lashing the horses with the ends of the bridles. They jolted along, kicking up the stones right and left. The officer beckoned to them, but they did not stop; they went on galloping towards the end of the village.

"Harness the horses!" cried the sergeant. "We're starting."

At the same moment a rider stopped near them. He slipped down from the saddle and leaned against the horse's rump. His sharp-cut features were shaken by a tremor which he was trying in vain to control.

"Move off!" he said. "Colonel's orders. He's stayed behind with the rear guard. In at most an hour the Germans will be here. His orders are to take all the wounded along."

He passed his hand over his lips, spat and began to weep, hiccupping:

"We can't hold out any longer, damn it all! Three times Maxineanu went out to counter-attack on foot. He still has some hundred cadets whom he's kept there... Here's the order."

He handed over a sheet of paper which the cadet took with his shaking hand. He read:

"Order: gather the wounded, retire in order towards Gurahonț, where the junction with the Red Army is to take place. My locum: Captain Popescu.

Max

Near the end of the village, the dull thunder of hand-grenades could be heard.

"Moise, take the ammunition waggon and go fetch the wounded," the cadet said to the sergeant-major. We'll meet on the road towards Gurahonț. Off you go."

"Who else is coming with me?"

"I," called Andrei. "The two of us!"

"You, civilian, you are a hero, my lad. Come on!"

In a twinkling they had taken all the chests out of the long, green waggon; the sergeant jumped on to the seat and put his rifle between his knees. At the same moment a shell burst in the middle of the road. The windows of a house were smashed to smithereens. The gun-horses reared.

Andrei and Ardeleanu jumped on to the waggon which had set off towards the end of the village where the machine-gun was still rattling uninterruptedly.

The road was full of retreating soldiers.

The sergeant smacked his lips furiously, cursing the horses wildly. As he had no whip, he stood up on the seat and hit the left horse with the heel of his boot; then, turning round to the other two men, he said angrily:

"We ran away from Stalingrad, we've been running ever since, but now... oh, curse them!... We were pleased at the time, because we were coming homewards. But now!... Our officers ought to be changed a bit. Yes, you need not stare at me. That's why we've run like hares: because our officers, the big shots, betrayed us."

Another shell raised a wall of earth up in front of them: the splinters were heard whizzing, and the terrified horses

started to run madly down the road, across a ditch, over a meadow. Andrei had barely the time to cling to the side of the waggon, so as not to be thrown out. From the coppice, where they had been in the morning, one by one, groups of soldiers were coming out and running with bent heads towards the first houses of the village. The sergeant stopped the waggon near a hollow maple-tree, jumped down and said to Andrei:

"You're coming with me, while you, the other one, keep an eye on the horses!"

They darted off. Andrei stopped instinctively every time he heard the whizzing sound of the bullets, but the sergeant reassured him:

"There's no sense in that, civilian, those are stray bullets, If they are doomed to hit you, they 'll hit you alright... Like that... I remember..."

He did not finish. Leaning against the stump of a tree, a soldier was trying to tie up with his teeth the dressing which kept slipping off his elbow.

"Go over there," said the sergeant pointing to where the waggon stood. "Where are the other wounded?"

"There's lots of them," said the soldier groaning. "Over there," he said turning his head towards the hill. "Some stretcher-bearers have come... Ouch! my arm's broken at the elbow..."

"Are there no others here?"

"Oh yes... About ten, among the trees..."

They came across them in a clearing dug up by bombs. With trembling hands, Andrei helped them up, almost sick with the sickly smell of the streaming blood. A man of about forty was lying on his black, holding with his hands his bowels, from beneath which black foaming blood was oozing out. They lifted him up gently, one by the head, the other by his feet, and made for the waggon, followed by the convoy of the rest of them. The sergeant was talking in whispers to the wounded man, with a strange gentleness:

"Don't be afraid, old man, you'll pull through, upon my word you will. In Gurahonț there's doctors. They cut you open, take the bullets out, and there you are... You'll be able to lie with your wife soon, don't you worry!"

The wounded man was quite lucid: he blinked his eyes misty with the approach of death, in his attempt to say something. When they got to the waggon, an officer on horseback rode past and called out to them:

"Maxineanu has fallen!"

The sergeant turned pale, then shouted after the rider.

"Where, sir? Where, sir?"

"Over there," the other said, pointing to somewhere behind him.

The sergeant started to run back, zigzagging over the meadow.

"Andrei followed him, but it was impossible for him to keep up with the sergeant until they entered the clearing again. Two cadets, panting under the weight, were carrying a long heavy body. The officer's head, half covered by the helmet, hung to one side, as though it were of wood. His shirt was red with blood, and the smashed fingers of his right hand were trailing on the ground.

"Oh, sir! Oh, sir!" the sergeant cried. "Oh, sir!"

"Finished," one of the cadets said, laying him down and starting to mop his brow. "It's all over..."

Sobbing aloud, the sergeant bent over the outstretched body, searching for his heart, then lifted his face full of tears to Andrei:

"He's dead... He's dead... What do you know about him? It was he who gave me those sergeant's stripes... He never called me, as the others do, you crow, you gipsy, you impudent blackamoor..."

He jumped to his feet and, with a strength nobody could have suspected in his thin body, lifted him up on to his shoulders and started running towards the waggon, followed with difficulty by Andrei and the two cadets.

Behind them the shots were not so dense. Looking towards the school building covered by a screen of yellow flames, Andrei saw a line of soldiers come out of the trenches and rush towards the valley. He again heard the iron clanking of the tanks. He hurried on. When they got to the waggon, he helped the wounded to get in. The man with the torn belly was holding his wound tightly covered and kept trying to speak. They stretched out Maxineanu's body in the waggon and, still crying, the sergeant got

on to the seat. One of the cadets tore the automatic rifle from his shoulder and shouted:

"It's the Hungarians. Go ahead!"

Far away, on the road, horsemen could be seen galloping, growing larger every moment. The sergeant lashed the horses. At the end of the village several houses were burning. In a courtyard, a peasant was drawing desperately from the well and running with the bucket to put out the flames that were licking the walls of his house.

"Slower, you ass!" one of the wounded cried to the sergeant, but he bit his tongue and spat up furiously a thin thread of blood.

The sergeant rounded a bend into an empty broken lane, urging the horses on, in Romany. When they reached the end of the lane, they saw that the little bridge which spanned the pond had been blown up. The maddened horses stopped short, getting entangled in the reins. Ardeleanu jumped down, took them by their muzzles and turned them round. The shots could now be heard close by, at the end of the village. 'They've caught us,' Andrei thought and, thrusting his hand into his pocket, he felt the grip of his revolver. But the road was empty. Only far off, towards the other end, the small green grasshopper-like silhouettes of the soldiers could be seen running. The floor of the waggon had become covered with blood: several wounded had fainted, the others, greenish-white in the face, their teeth set, kept whispering:

"Hurry, hurry up, get on, get on!"

The helmet had slipped off the colonel's face, uncovering his black eyes with their immense pupils, and the fierce grin of his mouth. Andrei took his coat off and covered him up. He felt like jumping out of the waggon. He thought that on foot he could run faster.

When they passed in front of the mayor's office, the big white gate opened quickly and several people came to meet them. Andrei saw the holy old man carrying a wooden tray with bread and salt in his hands, while a skeleton-like priest was stuttering with terror.

The astounded sergeant stopped the waggon, pulling hard at the reins. For an instant they looked into one another's eyes, then the holy man mumbled:

"We thought... the enemy had entered the village and..."

The sergeant lifted the rifle from his knees and put it to his eyes. The delegation vanished into thin air through the gate of the mayor's office. The priest stumbled on the threshold and fell headlong, scattering the bread and salt. There was a loud report and the bullet dug itself into the freshly planed wood.

A cadet was trying hard to wrench the hand-grenade from his belt, but the sergeant recovered and drove off.

"Traitors! Swine!" Ardeleanu said gnashing his teeth. "Let me only come back and I'll hang them myself, with these very hands."

When they got out of the little town, they did not slow down. Behind them, clouds of smoke were rising and writhing. The sky was of a washed-out grey, and a thin, lashing wind made the telegraph-wires hum. They were all silent. Andrei buried his face in his hands.

Avoiding the main road, taking small by-ways and country roads, or cutting straight across the fields, through stubble-fields along the dry bed of a pond, through the high grass on the edge of a wood, the waggon jogged along the whole afternoon and the whole night. Towards morning the sky broke and a thin trickling drizzle drenched the roads. Then the sergeant took the waggon again on to the main road. On the seat, Andrei had fallen asleep, curled up and leaning his head on the sergeant's bony shoulder, worn out with weariness and despair. When the waggon stopped, he awoke suddenly.

"We must take him down," the sergeant said, nodding towards the man with the ripped belly.

Want of sleep made his features seem thinner; he even looked darker. Only the white of his eyes gleamed with a glassy liveliness. They woke Ardeleanu up — the two cadets had got off, the sergeant informed him — and together they got the dying soldier out of the waggon. He had not lost consciousness, or perhaps he had just awakened, for he was repeating stubbornly: 'Down... on the ground...' They laid him down carefully by the side of the ditch, and he curled himself up completely, bringing his hands convulsively to his lacerated belly which exhaled a heavy, unbearable smell of pu-

trefaction. He wanted to say something, but had no strength any more, and, setting his teeth, tried to raise his head. Andrei slipped his hand gently under the back of his neck and helped him up. The soldier looked greedily at the grey, dismal sky, at the trees scattered about in the plain, at the hills rising far away, out of a bluish mist, then, taking his hands from his stomach, he dug his fingers into the earth of the ditch, clawing it impotently. All at once, he stretched himself out. The sergeant knelt down beside him, opened his rough tunic discoloured by the sun and by sweat, and looked for his papers. He had nothing on him except a rusty little badge with the No 11,947 engraved on it.

They went back to the waggon in silence. The other wounded men were slumbering shaken by fever. Only one of them, his hand wrapped up in dressing through which the blood had oozed staining it, was looking at him, terrified and beseechingly.

"Aren't you thirsty?" the sergeant asked and handed him his flask. He broke a rod from a tree growing near by and urged the horses on:

"Come on, come on, you jades! It's high time we were there."

Andrei fell asleep again, and woke up twice: once when the sergeant gave him some half-ripe plums to eat, and the second time when the noise of a plane was heard. The sergeant drew up near the road in a maize-field and beckoned to them to alight. Andrei lay down flat on his stomach, between some dried pumpkin stalks, but he heard the sergeant's shout of joy:

"It's Russian! Russian, lad! Civilian! It's Russian!" Andrei and Ardeleanu jumped to their feet, but the plane was disappearing towards Ineu. The sergeant began to dance a gipsy dance, striking on the legs of his trousers with his hands.

"Sturmovik!" He opened his mouth wide, showing his glittering teeth. "I know it: how many times it's threatened us, over there in Russia. Up into the waggon! The Russians are near."

The wounded soldier with the bandaged hand corroborated:

"It wasn't German... It had a red star on its tail... The sound seemed to be different too..."

The sergeant got the waggon started, whipping with the rod the horses whose legs were trembling. Andrei could not talk because of the jerks of the waggon, so he just kept gazing at the road the whole time; at each bend he hoped to see the Russian tanks appear.

Towards the afternoon they reached Gurahonț. Everywhere the field was covered with waggons, tents and people; here and there, thin bluish smoke rose. It looked like an immense encampment of gipsies halting there, among the dust-covered acacia-trees, along the ditches, in the village main street, in the courtyards of the villagers, under the trees which were slowly shedding their leaves. As far as the sky-line, darkened by the wall of a forest, there was nothing but refugees.

"The people from Lunca must he here," Ardeleanu said and, putting his hands on the sergeant's shoulder, he asked him to stop.

"Alright, civilians," said the latter smiling sadly. "Never mind, never mind, don't thank me. I liked the way you behaved. Farewell."

It was only when the waggon had started that Andrei realized he had forgotten to ask the gipsy his name.

Before entering the village, Andrei caught sight of him once more, driving slowly so as not to hurt the wounded men in the waggon.

The two of them leapt over the ditch and strode up to the nearest man: an old man who was roasting maize and warming his parched hands at the same time.

"Do you know if the people from Lunca happen to be here?"

"Oh, yes. They're here. Go right on. They've settled there near those trees... We've all settled down here. We're not going any further. Either the Russians come or we die here. But the Russians are not far off, perhaps they'll arrive today."

The people had taken their traps out of their waggons; they had spread out their cushions and quilts; a small stove was smoking near a waggon with a roof of half-dried reed grass, further away a few people were grinding

maize between two big round stones; a woman, her sleeves rolled up, was kneading bread in a wash-tub; round a kettle where maize-mush was boiling a whole family was assembled: the man was holding in his hand an earthen jar with garlic sauce from which all took some, in turns, according to age, while a thin little old man was bustling about, afraid that there would be none left for him; in a fresh pool a dirty, thin pig was sporting about; on a bed of mouldy straw a spotted cow was licking her new-born calf; a tipsy peasant was hitting his son with the end of his whip, scolding him: "Is that what you're after, you brat?" Everywhere, huddled up in the strangest postures, men, women, children were sleeping: a whole uprooted multitude bustling about under the sullen vault of a leaden sky.

The first acquaintance Andrei set eyes on was the chanter Grozuță, the same who on the road to Supreuș had kept crying the whole time: "My wife, my bairns!"

Grozuță was astonished, dumbfounded: he could only lift a hand towards the sky; then he recovered and left out a sharp cry:

"Good Lord, Andrei, in what a state you are!"

Andrei forced himself to smile, but his chin began to tremble. He squeezed vigorously the chanter's hands, who, turning round, began to call to the people:

"Hey, you, woman, Ioan, Lența, Creița, Lădoi, come here, all of you, and see who's come!... My Goodness, Andrei, you must be hungry. My, how the lady cried that night when you ran away! Oh, how she cried! I'd thought she'd cry her eyes out..."

"Where's mother?" cried Andrei, turning as white as a sheet.

"She took another road with Turculeț, the station-master. We don't know anything about her." Then, noticing Andrei's pallor, he tried to cheer him up: "Don't worry. Perhaps they went back to Lunca. If only God had made us stay there. Look, I've lost all I had; I don't even know how I'll feed my wife and children..."

Andrei and Ardeleanu were surrounded by a lot of familiar faces. Every man from Lunca wanted to shake hands with them, wondering at the state they were in.

It was then only that Andrei looked at his clothes. His coat, torn at the back nearly up to the collar, was hanging loose. His trousers were in shreds, his feet bare and dirty, wrapped up in the rags of the shirt Mitru Moţ had given him to make himself a footwear. He was lifted up and found himself seated, a cup of hot milk in his hand, near a fire which smelt of acacia-tree bark.

"Eat, Andrei, eat. If Mrs. Ana saw the state you are in..."

"How thin he's grown!" said a woman whose name Andrei could not recall.

He bent over the cup and swallowed a gulp of hot milk. His eyes were brimming with tears and his shoulders shook. Suddenly he saw a strange apparition jumping like a stork over the people lying down on the ground: Father Scarlat, in peasant clothes, with a huge fur cap pulled down over his forehead — as Prince Michael the Brave used to wear — half of his face full of soap. He rushed up to him, kissed him and started shouting:

"Well, I never! Well, I never! So you have also come?" And after this statement he started to explain why he was shaving. He knew very well that the Russians have a grudge against priests; that's why he was cutting his moustaches off... How were the Russians to know that he was a democrat, an atheist and an anarchist? Ecaterina too has grown a bit thinner; it's only with her father-in-law she keeps bickering all the time; keeps moaning and throwing herself down on the ground, sorry to have left her house on his advice. The Laboş woman is spitting blood: she won't live long now; she caught cold last night in the rain. After he had said all that, he got up and went away hurriedly, waving his razor in the air.

"He's rather feeble, the gentleman is," said Lădoi Cloambeş who had sat down near Andrei. He had grown much thinner, but was dressed cleanly and had polished his box-calf boots and their narrow tops. Then he complained to Andrei that he was very worried about Ioşca whom he had sent to Bucharest. He knew nothing about him.

"Now you'd better go and have a good rest... I've made room for you in my waggon," said Culă, a pointsman who lived near the school, after having patiently waited

for Andrei and Ardeleanu to finish their food. "The Russians are near: as soon as they pass, we'll start homewards in their wake. We won't let you go away any more. We'll all start together. As for food, we're sure to find something to eat."

Andrei thanked him. He got up and told them he wanted to have a stroll round; then he would come back and have a rest.

He asked right and left for news about his people, but the last man who had met them, Buşcu Mihăluţii, had seen them at Gurba, from where the waggons had barely escaped, for the hussars had surrounded the village, suspecting the troops from the frontier to be in hiding there.

Exhausted with weariness, Andrei returned to Culă's waggon. The latter had spread a white blanket out for him and put three cushions for his head. The soft bedding had a cool bitterish smell of dried herbs. He laid his weather-beaten cheek on the rough linen. He was hearing through a haze their muffled voices, people talking on the ground, not far from the waggon. They were continuing an argument they had probably started before his arrival.

"I'm surprised at you, Culă," Lădoi was saying stiffly, "that you can talk this way. If your father, poor old Clondor, could hear you..."

"You just let father rest in his grave. It is as I'm telling you: different times are coming now..."

"And you are pleased, aren't you?"

"Can't say I'm sorry. It's been lasting quite long enough; some living on the fat of the land, while others only sucking their fingers."

"Mother Maria, do you hear how he talks?" said Lădoi turning round to Culă's mother, a very old woman, yellow and shrivelled up, all packed up in a thick shawl of black wool.

"Well, Cloambeş, it's this way... We've been fawning on you long enough. Now it's your turn to fawn on us."

"Aren't you afraid of God?" Lădoi said indignantly.

"Were you afraid to send poor Mitru Moţ, Iancu's son, to the front?"

"Who sent him?"

"You did."

"Stop talking nonsense, old woman."

"It is no nonsense at all," Culă the pointsman said. "The whole village knows all you did to him, you and Sofron. And if Mitru comes, then I don't know how you'll fare, because he has sworn before the church that he'll kill the whole lot of you."

"We'll see," Lădoi laughed wrily. "And about the Russians, let me tell you this: it's well they're coming now, because it's hard for us fugitives on the roads, so may God bring them along, but afterwards, if we don't like them..."

"Who's 'we,' man?" Culă asked mockingly. "Perhaps you and your son. You've grown very brave all at once..."

"I tell you that much, Culă: take heed, for you may not like it. There you go talking all sorts of rot. Seems Ardeleanu, whom you've been seeing so very often, has been filling your head with Bolshevism."

"It's well I didn't go about like you, arm in arm with Blotor, legionary of the Iron Guard."

"I didn't go about with him!" Lădoi cried out angrily. "What the dickens was I to do? He's my nephew, isn't he? Should I have set my dogs on him? I've always been a democrat, people know it... With Maniu..."

"Yes, that's so," somebody agreed.

The Clondor woman rasped in her trembling voice:

"Stop squabbling, you'll have plenty of time at home. Culă, where's that bottle of brandy? The cold has overcome me... Stop quarrelling. You too, Lădoi, hold your tongue and don't get his monkey up, for you're none too good either."

From afar came a long yell.

"The Russians! Good folk, the Russians are coming!"

Andrei sat up: the whole field was astir; the crowd was running, jostling one another, rolling towards the main road. He shook Ardeleanu who was snoring, his head buried in the cushions.

"Get up, get up!... The Russians!"

"What? Where?" the mechanic shouted, and jumped out of the waggon.

They started too, losing themselves in the multitude. When they reached the ditch by the roadside, they had to use their elbows and fists, for a thick wall of bodies prevented them from seeing. From behind, others were coming all the time, shouting and gesticulating... When Andrei reached the first row, pushing aside a woman who was crying and holding a handkerchief to her mouth, a motor-bike, white with dust, appeared. On the side-car, in which a young machine-gunner was seated, a thick twisted mop of hair could be seen, showing from beneath his small cap with a big red star. An officer with broad golden shoulder-straps was driving slowly along, looking at the crowds on either side and waving his hand. The next moment the wall gave way and with a deafening cry the people began to crowd round .the motor-bike, stopping it. The old Clondor woman was striking energetically with her dry fists the backs of the people who would not stand aside, shouting with all the might of her weak chest:

"Our prayers have brought you... Make room for me, I want to see them too..."

On the road the square muzzle of a Jeep appeared, full of very young, tired and dust-covered soldiers, overladen with flowers and branches of trees. In a moment, the circle closed round them too, the crowd lifted them out of the car, carrying them on their shoulders. From everywhere, cups of water, of milk, slices of bacon, bread, grapes, were being handed over to them; sometimes only rough, hardened hands, which wanted to touch them, stretched out. For some time, only a confused noise could be heard, like a murmur; then, somebody shouted at the top of his voice:

"Long live the Russians!"

"Long may they live!"

"Hooray!"

"Hooray!"

They did not want to put the soldier they had lifted up and down any more, and he was laughing, wiping the sweat with his hand and making signs with his automatic pistol.

At last Andrei came up to the motor-bike and, like all the others, laid his hand on the dusty, hot side-car. With a spontaneous gesture he stretched his hand out

to the officer who, laughing, was begging the people to make room. He shook Andrei's hand vigorously and went on motioning, trying to explain to the people that they had to go on. Somebody thrust several big juicy pears into his hand and he, embarrassed, gave them to the man in the side-car, then stepped on the accelerator, making a resolute movement. The crowd stood aside. The motor-bike and the car full of soldiers drove off slowly. From everywhere branches, half-dried field flowers were offered them. A dark stocky peasant ran along the car, shaking everybody's hand. Others started hurriedly towards the place where they had halted.

"The war's over now... quite over..."

"Let's catch the horses and start back home..."

"Right you are."

"To the waggons!"

"Home!"

"The war's over!"

"But aren't any more coming?"

"Be quiet, you fool. That's the vanguard. The patrol, yes. In about an hour you'll see hosts of them, like the sands of the sea."

"Maria, go and gather the bairns. We're going home."

"Home?"

"Tudor, where have you been? Tudor, the Russians have come."

Andrei sat on the side of the ditch. The dust raised by the hundreds of people that vere running about on the road, enveloped him like a dry warm bath. A single thought filled his whole heart with a vivid joy: 'The war was over... The war was over... Now it was really peace...' He would have liked to start homewards. The war had finished. The rest was of no consequence, like a nightmare which you have got to forget.

Ardeleanu, who had called him everywhere, came running towards him, his face radiant with joy.

"Where have you been, Andrei? Well, have you seen? Have you seen them? What lads, mate!" He hugged him, unable to control himself, then shouted: "Listen, Andrei! The town was liberated yesterday, that's what people are saying. It seems, news came to the post-office. Here's

what I say: don't let's go with the waggon. Who knows how long the journey is going to take! It's far better by train. We'll go to Mădrigeşti, a village about six kilometres from here, and there we'll cut straight over the hills, where there is a station. In three or four days at the most, we'll be home... What do you say to that?"

"It's as you like... just as you like," Andrei said laughing and trying to tear himself away from his arms.

"Just wait and see when the Soviet guns and tanks start mowing them down! They won't stop till they reach Berlin, they won't, upon my word!"

They started to run towards the waggons. Suddenly Andrei stopped short and, catching hold of Ardeleanu's coat, called to him:

"The war's over!"

The field was all in a commotion. People were running for the horses they had taken to graze: they unclogged them and mounting them raced towards the waggons; a boy of about ten was doing his best to get together a flock of geese; others were picking up their traps and throwing them anyhow into the waggon, in a great hurry.

When they told Culă, the pointsman, that they wanted to go towards Vîrfuri, where they could take the train, the latter was against it, but they didn't listen to him. Ardeleanu explained:

"Neither will you be able to travel as you want. Think of it, the bulk of the Soviet troops is only just beginning to pass. Then they'll meet the Germans and lick them thoroughly, which means several days, all the same. You'd better come with us towards Mădrigeşti, and wait there."

"No!" cried Culă's mother, the Clondor woman. "We aren't going anywhere but home. Let them do as they like, Culă, give them a big loaf and some sausage for the way, and take out the bottle of brandy that we should drink their health."

The bottle travelled from hand to hand. Andrei was so worn out that he got fuddled at once, and his eyes began to shine gaily. He laughed and took another gulp. They said good-bye, embraced, then set out for Gurahonţ.

The doors of all houses were open; people were waiting in the lanes to see the Russians pass. From everywhere

the refugees were gathering, happy to be able to start homewards. They entered the school building. They wanted to see a map of the district and find the shortest way home. The class-rooms were full of people. Over the tarred wooden floor straw had been scattered, while beds had been made up on the narrow forms. With some difficulty, Andrei found the map and, taking a piece of paper, drew the route to Vîrfuri. He would have liked to shout to Ardeleanu every moment that they would soon be at home, but it was not necessary: he knew that he too was thinking of the same thing.

They were just leaving the school building, when a stumpy little man, with thick blurred spectacles, stopped in front of them. The first moment Andrei did not recognize him, as his head was covered by an immense brown chequered cap.

"Andrei," the notary Meliuță said, throwing his cap to the floor, in a popular fashion. "You look like Old Shatter-hand, or better still like Sam Hawkins. How did you get here? How glad I am to have met you! Come along and let Cornelia see you. You must be hungry ... I don't know anything about the respected Mrs. Sabin's whereabouts. Come along, man, we are here in the yard. We've made ourselves a wigwam in a strawstack."

Without giving them the time to protest, Meliuță dragged them after him. His eyes were shining with joy, happy to be able to relate.

"What extraordinary things have happened in these times," he said. "I don't know if you've heard... Yesterday our people freed the town. It was terrible there. The Germans collected all the Jews, took them into the Citadel and shot them. They looted every house in the town. Luckily they hadn't the time to set fire to it before retreating. A pity I wasn't there! It seems the last German went up into the steeple of the Catholic church and from there he fired his machine-gun the whole time until his ammunition came to an end. Then he shouted: '*Heil Hitler!*' and flung himself down. He fell down flat and was reduced to a jelly. At Timișoara the garrison resisted until the Soviet soldiers came. The Germans got as far as Deva. There they were destroyed. We're starting for home this very day, but

we're only waiting for the tanks to pass, for behind them I'm not afraid of anything. You're looking at my cap, aren't you? Father Scarlat advised me to put it on, just in case. Oh, what we've been through! Just think of the state I was in. My little girl had been left in town. You know, she's getting engaged. I thought we'd go mad... And one day I was sleeping in the waggon, I heard her golden voice calling: 'Daddy!' It was Neli... She had escaped from the besieged town. Good Lord! Why don't you say anything? Oh, how you look! How are you, Mr. Ardeleanu? Welcome, welcome. Come along, I've got some wine, we'll have a drink and then we'll go home. Here we are..."

On an outspread blanket in front of a straw-stack, into which Meliuță had dug a sort of cabin, his wife was setting the table. She was a handsome Spanish-looking woman. The whole village talked about her scandalous affairs. At first she did not recognize Andrei, but then she called:

"Neli dear, come quickly! Dear me, Andrei, what a sight you are!"

"Like a trapper *," Meliuță said.

Neli appeared on all fours at the door of the hut. She was muffled up in a big woollen shawl and had covered her hair with a kerchief. To Andrei she seemed very beautiful: she had large, black, shining eyes, a copper-coloured complexion; her supple movements were like those of a feline. As children they had played together on the banks of the Teuz. Then, when Andrei had grown up, he had realized one day that Neli was good-looking. He would have liked to try and make love to her, but he met with her heavy, disturbing silence. For a time he had thought that he was in love with her. She was a school-mate of Sonia's.

She held out her hand to him. She had thin, wet fingers. They all squatted down before a big tureen with potato soup. Neli pulled her dress tight round her thighs. Meliuță had started an argument with Ardeleanu, but Andrei did not listen to them.

"D'you know that Sonia stayed on in town?" Neli asked without looking at him.

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* In English in the text

"Did she?" he stammered foolishly. He hurried to drink a glass of wine, that she should not notice his unaccountable confusion.

"Here's to victory!" cried Meliuţă. He had become fuddled and kept groping for his wife's fingers on the soft blanket.

Then a loud rumble was heard from the road, and the shouts of the crowd. They all got to their feet and went out into the street.

Stirring the dust up with their caterpillars, the first Soviet tanks appeared, enormous, massive, with long guns striped with white.

They passed one after the other, making the earth quake, and the soldiers, gathered in clusters on the turrets, smiled and waved their caps. Their deafening rumble had drowned all other noises; it rolled through the air, making the trees, fences and windows shake. On the turret of a tank an elderly soldier was playing a concertina, beating time with his hob-nailed heel. After each stanza he paused and shouted with all his might in a deep bass voice:

"*Na Berlin! Na Berlin!*" *)

Suddenly the tank stopped short and the concertina-player slid from the turret which had opened.

"*Idite! Idite!*" the singer shouted, gathering up his concertina hastily. "*Nemetzkye samalioty... Pashli! Pashli!*" **)

Meliuţă turned pale, took his wife by the hand and ran towards the wigwam. Neli was left standing beside Andrei, clinging to his arm. On the grey sky three aeroplanes appeared, flying at a great height; the first dived down on a wing, fell like a bolt and again the heart-rending wail of the hooter was heard. Before running away she saw heavy anti-aircraft machine-guns opening fire from the turrets of the tanks, while the soldiers very calmly placed themselves in groups and fired at the plane that was swooping down upon them.

The bomb fell somewhere towards the end of the road. The tanks were firing in volleys without stopping. Pressing

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*) To Berlin! To Berlin!

**) Run away!... German planes... Get going!"

Neli's fingers lightly, Andrei ran along the orchard, passed through a hedge and crossed a yard swarming with people. To his left he caught sight of a ditch covered with weeds and lay down there, without letting go of the girl's hand. He clung tightly to her, covering her with his arms. "Don't be scared," he whispered to her hoarsely. "Don't be frighened. It'll pass... This also will pass..." She hid her head against his breast, trembling. Met by violent fire from the road, the planes turned away in a large circle and threw their bombs at random on the field. Andrei lifted his face up and saw a horse which had been galloping madly in a yard next door, take an enormous leap and beat the air with its fore-legs, with a horribly uncanny neighing. A splinter had cut off its muzzle at a single blow. The blood gushed forth as if it were a fountain. The horse rushed to the spot where a lot of people were huddled together. A soldier aimed a shot at it, missed it and ran out into the yard after it. The horse collapsed in a pool of blood, kicking savagely. Sticking the barrel of his rifle into its eye, the soldier killed it, then ran back. The planes had come back and were scattering a shower of bullets over the field where the waggons were lying. The tiles of the roofs rattled and broke. Neli clung with her nails to Andrei's neck.

"Hush... be quiet," he said stroking her naked arm that was shivering. "... Be quiet, it'll pass..."

A plane flew down over the road; the shots of the heavy machine-guns drummed like a heavy rain. The plane, hit by a straight shot, let a tail of smoke escape and crashed over a house, bursting into blinding flames. The other two soared up but, at the same time, coming from towards the hills, three small planes appeared, shining like silver.

The sky was furrowed by the shots of the airo-plane. A German plane tried to swerve, but the Soviet fighter followed it doggedly and, when he arrived near the wing on which the swastika could be seen, he fired.

"Come and see!" cried Andrei and drew Neli into the middle of the courtyard. From out of the houses, from under the fences, from the cellars, all the people had come out and were following with clenched fists the battle that was in full swing. Shouts were heard:

"Hit him, damn him!"

"That's right!"

"It's caught fire. Look, it's letting out smoke."

Like a bird that has been hit, clumsily, with broken wings, the German plane, a Dornier bomber, leaned to one side. A white bundle detached itself from it, and something tiny dropped at a tremendous speed.

"He's coming down with the parachute!"

"He ought to be shot!"

"Let him reach the ground, and we'll give him his due! Look, the umbrella is opening!"

"He's falling..."

Pursued by the Soviet planes, the other bomber flew away, gliding lower and lower.

"Where might Ardeleanu be?" Andrei was wondering anxiously and began to run. But Neli caught him by the waist and entreated him:

"Andrei... don't go. You must come with us... please, Andrei... please..."

He pushed her aside. He dashed through a yard where under a thicket he saw a woman writhing on the ground; then he went out into the street. The walls of the houses were riddled, spotted by bullet holes. Around the tanks, the road was strewn with thousands of brass tubes. The Russians had got out and were walking towards the head of the column. Andrei got in amidst them. He heard them speaking in a rage.

The front tank had been damaged by a shell which had burst quite near it. The planes had not been able to pass over the road, on account of the fire screen. Coming out of the village Andrei stood still, quite dumbfounded. The whole field was covered with dead and dappled with bomb craters looking like huge boils.

In the ditch an ox was lying, riddled by bullets, its white hide covered with wounds. The ox wasn't quite dead and its dark eyes flickered more heart-rendingly than a cry. An officer, in the black overall worn by the Soviet Tank-Corps, came up to it and shot it. Further on, a tall man was stretched out, his leg smashed from the thigh, his head turned round to one side; next to him two children, their backs cut up like mince-meat. Waggons

smashed to pieces, a tree with its broken branches hanging loose, people running everywhere calling one another. The waggons had got mixed up, the cattle had run far off, towards the wood, the wounded were howling, trying to stop the blood with the palms of their hands...

"Let's get away from here," whispered Neli. "Let's go, Andrei, for God's sake!"

He, however, stood motionless, petrified; his fingers only were fidgeting nervously. He set out across the field, looking for Ardeleanu. The people from Lunca had disappeared.

The tanks had started anew, driving on at full speed. Then motor-lorries full of soldiers chugging long heavy guns behind them. Above them flew a squadron of fighter-planes in close formation.

For hours on end, Andrei looked for Ardeleanu, but could not find him. Several people whom he asked, describing him to them — a thin man in black, wearing a new hat — shook their heads, quite unable to understand. Only one said to him: "I think I saw him, but cannot remember where." Andrei saw also the group of Soviet soldiers taking away in their midst the German pilot who had parachuted: a thin boy, his hair clogged with blood, casting stupefied glances right and left. Several people rushed at him with pitchforks and axes, and the Russians had to protect him. A short, swarthy officer explained something to the infuriated crowd, but nobody would step back.

"Let's kill him!"

"Stick the pitchfork into him, damn him!"

"Fighting against children, the cad!"

An elderly peasant, his shirt torn to shreds and his chest scratched by his nails, plunged like a ram into the midst of the soldiers, caught hold of the pilot's chest and hit him between the eyes with his fist as heavy as a beetle. They drew him aside, but he was tearing his clothes and yelling, his mouth foaming:

"My wife! Oh! Oh! My wife!... Let me go!..."

The Soviet officer turned to the pilot and said something to him. The latter burst out crying and lifted his hands, clasped as if in prayer.

"Andrei... let's go... I don't know what's happened to mother... You must come with us, Andrei. I am so

lonely," said Neli entreatingly. He did not hear her, as though he were deaf.

They walked together up to the house where Meliuţă was staying, and found him sobbing aloud with anxiety. Andrei shook hands with them — he seemed to do all these actions in a dream — and went off, while Neli kept calling after him:

"Where are you going? Stay! Father, tell him to stay!"

On the road, the Soviet units were passing continually: heavy tanks, lorries full of soldiers, anti-tank guns, platforms placed across lorries, long high waggons loaded with ammunition, small green cars with square muzzles, tractors with caterpillars dragging huge mortars of high calibre, Red-Cross ambulances, smoking field-kitchens, then again tanks loaded with soldiers.

All Andrei's thoughts were for Ardeleanu. Where could he be? He said to himself that he had certainly escaped — he must have escaped — and may have set out for Vîrfuri, hoping to meet him on the road. He sat down by the side of the road, arranged the rags round his feet and set out eastward. He would be sure to meet the mechanic.

Andrei's journey lasted nearly a week. The weather had broken: a cold biting wind was raising the dust on the road, scattering it over the withered endless plain, making the telegraph-wires wail shrilly, tearing off the leaves of the trees... Everywhere the grass had grown yellow, the nights were chilly, and in the morning it drizzled monotonously. Then a light the colour of burnt ashes would come down like dim steam. Only here and there, like a dark flame, the crowns of the rusty trees shone opaquely, as if speckled with drops of dry blood.

Andrei walked on and on. He had no hope left of finding Ardeleanu, and he was sorry he had not stayed at Gurahonţ. Now it was too late to go back. He had not the strength to do it.

Nobody had seen the mechanic. In the villages through which he passed the waggons with refugees were starting for home, driving by the side of the road, to leave room in the middle. On the other side the Soviet troops were advancing in endless columns, in an uninterrupted stream. Once only a German plane appeared above the road which

it machine-gunned. Andrei jumped into a greenish, slimy pool of water nearby. It was towards evening, and he was stung by hundreds of mosquitoes. When he got out, he was covered all over with a crust of thick slime, as sticky as glue. The four-barrelled machine-guns on the lorries set the plane on fire. It flew away with difficulty, leaving a tail of smoke behind, and crashed in a wreath of flames on the skirts of the forest.

That same night, wet through, his teeth clattering, Andrei slept in the courtyard of a church, hidden in a damp, mouldy hay-stack. He woke up soon: a dazzling light flashed across the sky, like a giant incendiary rake, and a prolonged wail, sharp and rending, rang through the night. Terrified, Andrei took to his heels, but a Soviet soldier stopped him, laughing at him:

"*Katyusha,*" he explained proudly, "*Katyusha daragaia.*"

The shooting did not last more than a quarter of an hour, but never had Andrei seen anything like it. It seemed as if unleashed storms were bursting forth from an erupting volcano. A blinding light, as of magnesium, snatched the houses, the trees, the fences out of the dark, lending them ghostly proportions, then, all of a sudden, silence would set in: only the echo kept howling for a long time over the hills — as if the earth were moaning. Towards evening, Andrei rested in a lonely barn full of dried pumpkins among which rats were swarming. Numb with the cold, he cowered under the roof. Down along the road a regiment of Cossacks had stopped: he heard the restless snorting of the horses, the clinking of the mouth-bits, the voices and the footsteps of the men. A bright fire was blazing by the road-side. Andrei dragged himself to the barn door: on the ground, around the fire, the Cossacks were warming themselves. They were wearing black tunics with metal cartridge-boxes across, astrakhan caps with a silver cross on the red or blue crowns, and sabres with brass-handles in black wooden sheaths. They had spread their hairy grey-coats on the ground, and had begun to sing. Andrei had heard Russian tunes before, but now, all alone, far away from home, the manly nostalgia of the powerfully resounding song moved him as never before: he was squatting at the door of the tall barn, and

his eyes were brimming with tears. First the voice of a single singer quivered, a low tenor, then all took up the tune again, joining in a chorus. It seemed as if one could hear the wind roaring over the endless steppe, just as Gogol had described it. Then the foaming of a tumultuous river rolling down majestically in a flaming sunset, carrying away on its waters the sun's last reddish beams, while a lonely rider, his hood floating in the evening breeze, stood out against a round hillock... And the waters flowed... and their murmur died away in the distance... Andrei fell asleep.

At daybreak, big drops of water drummed on the foliage. The Cossacks had departed. From the road came the rumble of the tanks and lorries. The clamour of the road poured a new wave of energy into him. 'Come on,' he said to himself, 'let's get going. I must get home...'

He walked the whole day in the rain. He passed through a village where he went to the mayor's office to warm himself and to take his bearings. The building was deserted. Andrei saw that he had got strayed — he had lost the sketch he had made at Gurahonţ — and, in order to reach Vîrfuri, he had to cut across some hilly woodland and pass through a Hungarian village, Varseg. He lined his shirt with bits of paper torn out of the registers scattered on the floor.

The rain had not stopped. He was terribly afraid he might be taken ill, right here on the road. A peasant took pity on him and sold him a thick blanket smelling of horses, and a pair of wooden-soled over-size boots, whose worn-out leather was cracked all over. Andrei stuffed them with paper and had a heavenly feeling of bliss when he put them on. Muffled up in the blanket, he started climbing the slope of the clay hill, his feet slipping the whole time.

From afar came the rustling of the forest lashed by the thin rain hitting the leaves. Andrei walked along its skirts, afraid of losing his bearings. He was hoping to meet somebody who would show him the way to Varseg, but not a soul was to be seen anywhere. Turning round several times, he looked at the road along which Soviet lorries were winding their way. It was growing darker and darker, as though a thunderstorm was approaching. Towards the

west the sky was bluish black, and from there the wind was lashing, spreading out the wall of clouds. The thin twigs were bending, the grass was swaying like wisps of hair blown by the wind, the forest rustled threateningly and mysteriously.

The night fell and, dead tired, Andrei wondered if it would not be better to stay there and look for a shelter somewhere. He remembered the stories he had heard on the road, of German parachutists hiding in the woods and killing civilians to take their clothes, and went on. He took his revolver out of his pocket and unfastened the safety catch. Holding it in his hand, he somehow felt safer. He did not realize how long he had walked — his watch had stopped long ago, it had got broken while he was running with the ammunition chests at Ineu — so that he had not the faintest idea what time it might be. Every moment he was expecting the clouds to break and the water to pour down on him. He felt very cold. Once his feet got caught in a dry weed and he uttered a fearful cry, tearing himself away with force. He slipped and fell. His fingers dug themselves into the soft soil covered by a wet carpet of leaves. When he got up, he saw a small light blinking somewhere in the valley, and was about to give in to his first impulse and dart, rolling down towards it. He shook himself and passed his fingers over his burning forehead. Now he was hot. He took the blanket off his shoulders, and the wind cooled his heated body most pleasantly. Feeling his way, he began to descend, leaning from time to time on one hand. He finally reached the cart-road. The lights were drawing nearer. At the entrance of the village he distinguished only a wooden board, but could read nothing else but a "V." He closed his eyes. He had eaten nothing that day, yet he felt he wanted to vomit. 'I don't want to be ill,' he said in a loud voice, and was surprised how strange his voice sounded. When he entered the village, a dog barked, but seeing the passer-by was frightened and did not threaten to hit him, he left him alone. Andrei went straight to one of the first houses, in the window of which a light was burning. When he came near, he saw that it was built of stone and very massive. 'Here I'll surely find a bed,' he said to himself. 'I must

sleep in a bed.' The gate was open and in the yard he saw nobody. He went up the stone steps, crossed a long passage paved with cement and, seeing a door, he stopped to regain his breath before knocking. He patted his hair which had grown too long. He did not want to frighten the inhabitants and was aware that his appearance could not inspire confidence. Luckily, he knew Hungarian. He pressed the massive iron door-handle down. The door opened with a creak, and he found himself in an ante-room smelling strongly of wet clothes and dogs. He saw a ray of orange-coloured light passing under the threshold of a door and, proceeding towards it, hit against a table with his hip. An iron object fell heavily; Andrei started. The door opened and in its frame the shape of a fat man clad only in his shirt appeared.

"Who's there?" he asked in Hungarian, suspicious and frightened.

"A refugee," said Andrei quickly. "Please, could I..."

"Come here," ordered the man.

Andrei came nearer. He spoke quickly, in Hungarian too:

"I've been on the road for a week. Could I have a place to rest?..."

The man stepped aside, but did not let him come inside. The very large room was lit only by an oil-lamp placed on the long, heavy table covered with papers. Around it sat some bearded men who looked fixedly at Andrei. The sooty lamp-chimney lighted up only the lower part of all their faces. There were about five of them: one clad in a hairy black peasant coat, two in green-stained smocks made out of camouflage sheets, the others in short black coats. On a corner of the table, several hand-grenades and an automatic pistol with three chargers. Beside the small, red-hot cast-iron stove, a young , bald-headed man wearing spectacles was shivering, wrapped in a striped blanket. The man in the peasant coat rose slowly, heavily, propping his hands on the edge of the table. He pushed the chair aside. His giant shadow projected itself on the wall from top to bottom, sweeping him away. He came up to Andrei and gazed at him searchingly. Then he turned to the others.

"I am worn out with fatigue and cold," Andrei mumbled in Hungarian. "If I might..."

"Get out," the man with the peasant coat said in a low voice. "Go outside and wait there. We shall call you. Don't go out of the courtyard, do you hear? Go now."

Andrei went out walking backwards. He was wondering who those people might be and what they were up to. Everything seemed to him mysterious and strange. Feeling his way with outstretched hands, he went out of the passage and stopped in the middle of the yard. It had begun to rain again. The blanket had got wet, and cold drops were trickling down the hot back of his neck. He looked for a shelter, but could see nothing. He walked straight on, taking big strides, until he knocked against the fence. He went alongside it. His knees were wobbling and shaking with exhaustion. He came against a plank shed and, when he stretched his hand out to feel it, a pointed splinter wedged itself into his finger. He fell on his knees and slipped inside, heedless of the acrid smell and the dirty straw. Wrapping himself well up in the wet blanket, he coiled himself up, his knees drawn up to his mouth. 'If mother could see me,' he thought sadly. A medley of pictures, like a kaleidoscope, flashed before his eyes: the field broken up by bombs, the blood stains, the smashed waggons, the tanks making the earth quake, the sensation of choking when he heard the thin whizzle of the bombs... With a sore heart, he thought of Ardeleanu — he was surely dead — of Dan, of the teachers... A crowd of familiar faces whirled round as a merry-go-round in a fair, heaved and sank, smiled or vanished frowning, greenish, distorted with fear, greed and hunger... His eyes were burning as if they were two balls of heated metal; his fingers, on the contrary, were numb, frozen. Should he try to move them now, they would break like icicles... The rain trickled down on him — it resembled the chirring of the crickets — only more regular... 'An Arab came to see the pasha' *... Those lines always conjured up images of hot sand — so hot that, when you stepped on it, a shiver went through your body, the same as when you suddenly plunge into too hot a bath... Oh, for a hot bath, a new scented cake of soap!...

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*) First line of a well-known Rumanian poem by G. Coşbuc.

"Hey!" a thick voice cried out. "Where are you?"

He was not quite sure whether he had heard right or whether it had been only his imagination. He kept quiet. It was all right here too, and he had not the strength left to get up. Yes, he was very comfortable here...

"I told you, Iancu, you should have dispatched him, didn't I?... He may have listened."

'Funny, they're speaking Rumanian. Well, what of it? I've most likely got a temperature,' he thought. 'I must sleep. It's only weariness.'

The men trampled about the yard for a while, then one of them said:

"Let him go to the devil. I am surprised the dog did not bark. He may have overheard something..."

"Go and tell the boys to look for him... He may have gone ... Get a move on, don't stand gaping at me. See how the boys are accomodated. Don't let them get drunk like pigs. Go on, look sharp!"

The whole night Andrei tossed about in a nightmare; once, long ago, during a journey on the train, he had seen a strange place between some rocks. Near the straight, grey black-striped wall, a blackish-green water sparkled, into which a storm had thrown a young birch-tree. The water, as motionless as ice, looked terribly deep. A water of prehistoric times. Now he dreamt that he was on its banks; he slid and sank: the water was tepid but dragged him continually to the bottom, and breathing became more and more difficult; he sank, the water turned reddish and, down towards the bottom of the earth, there was a black sucking mouth. Then the sinking changed into a floating of leaves and, rocking, he fell onto a bed of dry flowers. A hairy body was near him, as hot as a furnace. It might have been a monkey or rather a bear skin — no, it was a stove. And all at once the bells began to toll as for a fire...

Andrei woke up, rose to his feet, knocking his head against the roof of the shed. A big, shaggy dog, as tall as a calf, stretched, growled and, hitting his ribs with his tail, went out of the shed.

It was morning: the church bell could actually be heard tolling; it was ringing continually. Andrei could hear

women crying, a child howling, and a shot. He became uneasy and let himself out; he casually stroked the back of the dog that put its big head against his hand. From behind some leafless, yellow plum-trees, a black choking smoke was rising. 'Indeed the village is burning,' Andrei said to himself. Dimly recalling the events of the night before, he did not go out through the courtyard, but crossed a large muddy backyard. There was a small gate at the far end. He opened it and passed into another backyard. At that moment he heard a scream and saw a woman snatching her child up into her arms and running in front of him, screaming. Astounded, he crossed the courtyard and got out into the street, where a crowd of people were running about like mad. All of a sudden, they scattered. Coming from the other end of the street, two men dressed in military coats were dragging along a peasant who was writhing, biting their hands, howling and resisting with all his might. Enraged, one of the two who were dragging him along, stepped aside and, lifting his weapon, hit him heavily between the shoulders. The man fell down, letting his face sink into the mud. Then they caught hold of his feet and pulled him along. The bare head left a deep mark in the mud.

Without stopping to think, Andrei rushed after them shouting:

"What are you doing with him?"

Taken by surprise, they let go of the man and turned round to him menacingly.

"What the hell do you want?" said one of them with a frown raising his pistol. The other man a red-haired young fellow, fat and dead-drunk, pushed his fur-cap back, took a step towards Andrei and shouted, showering spittle on him:

"Hello, Andrei! Hello, pal, hello!...,,

It was Ioşca Cloambeş. Red in the face, his small eyes sunk deep into his head, he laughed stupidly, gripping Andrei by his coat lapels. The latter looked at him in bewilderment. Beneath his soldier's coat, without any epaulets, Ioşca was wearing an old-fashioned brown vest. Round his waist he wore a sash with the Rumanian colours, all stained with mud.

"Just fancy where we were doomed to meet! Leave him alone. brother," he said turning to the other fellow who, not less drunk, was messing about with the lock of his rifle.

The peasant lying in the mud groaned and made as if to get up on all fours. The fellow kicked the nape of his neck.

"Lie down there in the mud you damned Hungarian. And keep your nose in the mud, when you are before Rumanians."

"What are you doing here?" Andrei asked.

Ioşca shifted his weight from one foot to the other, spat between his teeth and, throwing his head back, began to chuckle self-confidently:

"Ha, ha, ha, you'll see, pal. You haven't seen the like of it since the honourable lady, your mother, bore you. Don't be angry with me. I'm nothing but a stupid peasant, I have no schooling," he rapped out. "Don't be ashamed of me, old pal, that wouldn't be nice. We come from the same village, the two of us... Ha, ha, I haven't forgotten that you beat me once, when we were kids. You could box, you could indeed ... Yes, gentlemen tricks. In Bucharest I got to learn some boxing myself. Now just you dare say anything to me, and you'll see!"

"I won't say anything to anybody," Andrei answered quietly. "What are you doing here?"

"Justice, comrade," said the other individual raising his arm in a Roman salute. He was thin but broad-shouldered, and clad in a torn black raincoat. "We pay back the Hungarians for our sufferings. Come on, you bloody Hungarians, come on," and with the tip of his boot kicked the temple of the man who was lying on the ground "Come on."

"That's how it is, pal," Ioşca mumbled confusedly. "I managed to escape from the front. Then I went to Bucharest. Oh, what I saw and learnt there! Now we're come to wipe out all the Hungarians in Transylvania... Oh, Andrei, a pity you weren't with us last night. You think my face is a bit drawn, what? The whole night long I've lain with women... Two men held them... What wenches... just the kind you liked... some thirteen years old and others twenty-five just the age when a woman

is at her best... Plump, just the right kind to put your arm round her..."

At the end of the street a man shouted something and waved his arms, then, no doubt gone off his head, fired a volley with his automatic pistol.

"Come on, Cornel, it's starting. Are we going to stay here till tomorrow? We have still places to go. Make him get up. You come too," he said frowning at Andrei. "You'll see what you've never seen since you got out of... Never mind what I say, I'm drunk... I love you, pal..."

They lifted the man up out of the mud. He looked at them, stunned. His lips were bruised and his left eyelid was torn and hung down, bleeding.

"Come!" shouted Ioşca. "Move on! What are you waiting for? Or is it you are sick of us? Well, let me tell you that we are democrats, Maniu's guard, that's what we are, yes... When we left Bucharest, the great gentlemen, the ministers shook our paws. 'Go,' they said, 'and show the Hungarians what stuff we're made of!' Fine words. We're paying them back now, isn't that so, Comrade Cornel?"

"What kind of guard?" Andrei asked.

"The Maniu guard," said the man answering to the name of Cornel. He grinned, showing his yellowish teeth, broad and flat like horse's teeth. "That's what it's called now... Hey you, bloody Hungarian, to the church, or to the temple as you call it... For God is with us..."

When they reached the main street, Andrei saw several men in strange attire; short black leather jackets, peasant coats or just quilts put round their shoulders like capes. They were driving before them men, women, children, continually firing their automatic pistols into the air.

"And what do you want to do, man?" Andrei yelled, shaking Ioşca by the shoulder.

"You'll see," the latter said with a stupid laugh. "you'll see. We'll get a decoration too... You'll see how the young ladies'll run after us when we return to Bucharest with Hungarian heads tied to our belt... D'you know what I think?" he said brightening up. "You come along with us. You look like a tramp. I'll give you clothes. I've got plenty in a chest, where our waggons and lorries are. What

do you say to that? We came in lorries. I'll talk to Captain Sarca, and he'll take you gladly. What a man the captain is! When the Russians entered Bucharest, he hid for a while because of... I don't know what. Then he became a big shot. He's like a father, so kind... A kind man... And how he drinks! And, oh Lord, what he does with women! You wouldn't believe it. When anyone mentions the Hungarians to him, his nose bleeds, he likes them that much... Look, there he is; just look at him."

In front of the church the tall man with the peasant coat, who the night before had told Andrei to wait in the yard, was bustling about. He was bareheaded. His black hair descended at a sharp angle almost down to his eyebrows. His mouth was concealed by a big moustache like that of a highway man. He had thrown his coat over his shoulders, and was thrusting his fingers under a wide leather belt from which there hung a heavy revolver and a small bag with hand-grenades. He was giving orders, lashing the top of his boots with a riding crop. Firing short volleys continually, the "guards" pushed forward the crowd which was huddling together, horrified, crushing against the far too narrow gate of the church. Looking up, Andrei saw that on the flat roof two machine-guns had been placed, pointing at the people. Then he heard a scream and turned round. Along the roadside some ten "guards" were bringing a group of young peasants along. They had bound them to one another with ropes and were dragging them furiously, hitting them wherever they could with the butt-ends of their weapons.

Andrei's blanket dropped from his shoulders, but he did not stoop down to pick it up. He clung to Ioşca's arm:

"Listen, Ioşca, what do you want to do with these men? Are you going to beat them? Or what..."

"You'll see... We've got a fellow, Goguţ... Fănică... Phew! He was an apprentice at the slaughter-house in Bucharest. When he'll tell you how he hung the Jews by their tongues, you'll hardly believe him. By their tongues. With hooks. Serves them right — for being Jews. Don't you think so, what?"

Seeing Andrei kept silent, he turned towards him suspiciously:

"You don't side with the Jews, do you? Or with the communists, do you?"

"Shut up!" said Andrei frowning and shoving him aside. "You're drunk."

Ioşca was cowed and kept silent; then he rushed up to the peasant they were leading and kicked him in the back:

"Get on, you dirty Hungarian! You lousy Hungarian, get on!"

Andrei caught him by the back and, pulling him nearer, hissed through his teeth:

"Don't hit him, Ioşca, do you hear?"

Ioşca wrenched himself free, but Andrei did not let go.

"Hush!" Ioşca said then, raising his hands and pulling a long face. "Hush! Be quiet or they'll kill you right away. You don't know what kind of people they are... I too... hiccup... want to... I've had enough of it... I'm fed up with everything. This isn't going to end well, listen to what I tell you. But hush and run away as soon as you can."

They had reached the gate which led into the courtyard. Andrei defied the "captain's" gaze. The latter took a step towards him and said darkly:

"Where have you been, sparrow? Where?"

"He's my friend," put in Ioşca. "From the same village as myself. He's the schoolmaster's son."

The, "captain" broke out into a burst of laughter.

"Then why the devil did you speak Hungarian last night? You might have caught it badly. Well, I never..."

Andrei felt something in his throat which prevented him from uttering any sound. The "captain" held out a big, black and very soft hand.

"My name is Sarca," he said. Where do you come from?"

"A refugee..."

"Is that so... And why the devil do you speak Hungarian? We are the masters here, it's we who give orders. We're going to teach those scoundrels of Hungarians, we'll show them that the legendary Rumanian mercy has a limit too. Where did you sleep?"

"In the courtyard.,, Every word hurt Andrei like a tooth drawn out.

"I'm sorry... Are you a student?"

"Yes

"Captain," reported a stocky fellow, unshaven for a week, standing approximately at attention. "I've brought along those put down on the list." He took a paper out. "Sándor Juhos, Lajos Szabo, Gyurka Szilágyi, Jozsef Farkas... They're in the yard.,,

"Alright. Carry on!"

The "captain" turned his back on Andrei, and strode over the high worn-out threshold. The villagers had been placed in a square in the corners of which groups of "guards" holding out their pistols were standing. Most of them very pale were noisily, opening and shutting the lock of their rifles.

A heavy silence, like a slab of stone, choked the crowd. An old man, standing in front, fell down on his knees and began to cross himself with broad gestures. A child asked curiously:

"Mummy . . . What are they going to do to daddy?"

Andrei wiped his wet forehead mechanically. He felt that here something frightful was going to take place and, powerless, leaned against the side of the rough wall. From behind the church came the noise of an axe, striking continually. The row of people was brutally pushed aside, and a young man, a woollen cap pulled down over his ears, began to roll a heavy tree trunk. The "captain" drew his coat upon his shoulders; then without taking his hands out of his belt, strode into the middle of the square.

"You Hungarian swine," he yelled and his exasperation made his voice break ludicrously. "The time has come for you to pay for your millenary crimes. Our martyrs demand vengeance!" He stopped short and looked towards the group of "guards" who were watching the square. First one of them yelled, then the others, in a chorus of hoarse drunkards' voices'

"Vengeance! Vengeance!"

"Now the Germans who protected you are no more. Transylvania is ours for ever. You shall pay. You shall pay."

"You... shall... pay..."

"The old man, who was still down on his knees and was following with his head the rhythm of the speech, clasped his hands together and said beseechingly:

"But for dear God's sake, sir, speak so that we too should understand something."

"Learn, you old fool!"

"Yes... yes," the old man nodded, "old fool..."

"Quiet!"

"Eye for eye, tooth for tooth," roared the "captain." "The church bells!"

"The church beeellls!" a guard from the roof called out.

The prolonged knell poured down its wailing over the gathering.

"Now! Look now," Ioșca groaned raising the cock of his automatic pistol...

A young fellow, his arms tied behind his back, nearly up to his shoulders, was brought forw ard by two "guards." They threw him down beside the trunk and made him put his face against it.

"Imreee!" shrieked a woman, and the row of people swayed. The "guards" were frightened and fired several shots in the air; one of them jumped to the front, carrying a handgrenade.

"That's Goguț," said Ioșca pointing at the thin man with the hooked nose and a small woollen cap, who had taken his jacket off, folded it and, after laying it down further away, came near and lifted the axe.

A black veil dropped before Andrei's eyes; everything seemed to reel. He leaned against the wall, afraid he would fall down. The blade shone in the air, then a hollow sound was heard, and a wave of blood gushed forward, splashing the trunk, the executioner's hands and his face contracted by strain. He dealt several more blows: the head rolled, and the body stretched out its feet, writhing.

A long howl rose from the people gathered there: the old man curled up his face to the ground; the women covered their eyes, an old woman rent her dirty blouse open, tearing at her flabby breasts.

His legs wide apart, the "captain" had stopped two steps from the tree trunk. He kicked the corpse aside and yelled hoarsely:

"The next! The next! The next! Quicker!"

"László Horváth!" cried the stocky man, waving the list.

From behind the trees, a white-haired man with a long, grey moustache was shoved forward. He stepped with his chest thrust forward, as for a parade, stamping firmly with his bare soles.

"You did the same during the revolution, you red beast!" the "captain" thundered, but the man turned to him proudly and said only:

"No. It's a lie!"

He would not kneel down, and four men had to hold him. When his head fell, they drew him aside, covered with blood from head to foot. One of them could not control himself and began to vomit.

"You old woman!" the "captain" said sneeringly.

Suddenly, the row of people broke and rushed towards the trunk. One "guard" was trodden down, the others opened fire, then hurled themselves forward, brandishing their weapons.

"The next! The next! the "captain" shrieked, his face purple, his lips covered with a whitish foam.

Andrei crept along the wall and coming out of the church courtyard, took a few steps, not knowing what he was doing. Behind him, the yells of the crowd could be heard followed by shots, then a short silence, the heavy, forced panting of the executioner, and the hollow blow, the cracking of smashed bones.

He started to run. He saw, as through a haze, the houses dancing on both sides of the road. Feeling that he was choking, he tore his shirt-collar open. How long had he been running like that? He could not tell. When he came to himself, he was sitting on a wet stone, his feet in mud up to the ankles. He had lost one of his boots; a sharp stone had cut his bare sole, and the blood ran over the mud crust. It could not be true... It could not... The dark sky, the small houses, the murky road, the black trees like skeletons, danced before his eyes. It was quite impossible, it could not be true... He turned round. He stalked plashing through the cold mire without feeling anything. The bell had stopped ringing. Only from the church there came the sound of rare stray shots. When

he got there, the crowd had scattered. In the empty yard five headless corpses lay strewn about, over which the women had flung themselves smearing themselves all over with blood. The red trunk had been pushed near the white wall of the church and left there. A young woman, her dress torn from top to bottom, snatched off her kerchief to cover her husband's body with it. A tall black figure ran through the yard, passing between the dead bodies, without looking. He was carrying in his hands a small wooden chest and a crucifix.

"Father, Father," a woman cried clinging to his legs and clasping them in her arms. "Father... Father... Father!"

Andrei passed beside the women who did not notice him, and went into the church. He cowered down in the recess by the entrance, but slipped and sprawled on the flagstones, laying his forehead close to them. And suddenly a thought flashed through his mind like lightning.

He got up quickly and, going out of the church, started along the village street, staggering. He saw several men take the bodies of the beheaded, lay them on blankets and proceed forth, followed by the women walking like dazed in a besotted silence.

He entered the yard of the first house he saw. A peasant wanted to hide, but with a leap he was by him and caught hold of his hand:

"They'll kill the whole lot of you!" he shouted to him in Hungarian "Something must be done. The Russians are not far off... For God's sake, man, get me a horse! I'll go and fetch them. But don't stay and gape like that! Hurry, hurry, hurry along!"

The peasant looked at him insistently:

"Come inside and I'll fetch a horse."

Stumbling, Andrei entered a dark kitchen. At the sight of him a small girl began to scream; the man shouted from outside:

"Be quiet, Iuliş be quiet!"

Worn out, Andrei rested his head on the table. The little girl came up to him and asked:

"Are they going to cut your head off too?" but Andrei did not answer.

He did not realize how much time had passed, when the man came and told him:

"You can start. Rightaway. Go by the valley. In a quarter of an hour you'll be at Şubleş. They are setting fire to the houses. Ride the horse as hard as you can, even if it dies. They've raped Eva, the teacher's daughter. They're taking everything out of the houses."

A small, hairy horse was neighing in the yard. The peasant threw a blanket over it, helped Andrei up and gave him a rod.

"Off you go! Off you go!" he shouted.

Andrei could not ride and, was, as a matter of fact, rather afraid of horses, but now he buried his hands in the horse's long mane, and struck it madly with his heels. Turning round he saw smoke rise from a long straw-rick.

The bell began to toll again.

The horse's withers were hurting his seat; several times he was almost thrown off, but he did not slow down his pace. He passed like a whirlwind through a small pond, scattering drops of mud; he passed through a grove which lashed his face and made it bleed. The wind raised by the horse's gallop cooled his temples, did him good. 'If only I could get there! If I could only get there!' he prayed. At a jolt, he bit his lips and felt on his tongue the salty taste of blood. He bent still more forward on the horse's mane, nearly burying his face in it.

He rode more than two hours without slowing down, until he saw the houses of a hamlet. Now only did he realize that he was crying: the tears streamed down his face and vanished, dried by the wind. He crossed a field of maize-stubble. The horse tripped and threw him over, but Andrei was not badly hurt. He mounted again.

"Go! Go on!" he spoke childishly to the horse whose ribs were drenched with sweat. Amidst the creaking of the broken maize stalks, he heard the noise of the advancing columns, the puffing of the lorries, the trotting of the horses. He led the horse on to the road, leapt over the ditch and made for the hamlet, the streets of which were swarming with soldiers. He reined in the horse suddenly making it rear. He dragged himself up to a field-kitchen, which let out a pleasant hot steam of soup, and cried:

"Headquarters! Where are the headquarters?"

A young soldier looked at him attentively, then beckoned to him to follow. Andrei walked with difficulty, hardly able to drag his feet. They entered a small, low house, above which a lot of telephone wires were crossing each other. The soldier said something to the sentry who let them step in. Inside, in front of a table covered with a map, several officers were seated. Thick bluish tobacco smoke floated everywhere. Staggering, Andrei went towards a tall officer with spectacles, who motioned to him to sit down. The interpreter also came. Andrei tried to speak, but at the beginning he was unable to utter any sound.

"Pull yourself together," the interpreter said. "Have a cigarette."

Andrei inhaled deeply the first mouthful of smoke, felt dizzy and his head rang as if it were empty. Then, in short, clipped sentences, he related all that had happened at Varseg.

"I think they are still there. If we hurry up, we may still catch them. We must."

"Are you Hungarian?" the officer asked through the interpreter.

"No, Rumanian. A student... Here are my papers."

He took out his student's card, all discoloured by perspiration, and handed it to the spectacled officer who studied it for several moments, then rose and said something in Russian to the others.

An officer got up, put on his belt quickly, and went out. Andrei was drumming impatiently on the corner of the table. The interpreter asked him some questions: the number of the ruffians, how they were armed, when they had arrived. In the meantime, the officer with the spectacles was talking over the telephone, apparently reporting to a superior officer.

"Yes," he said laying down the receiver, "you are going with us."

"Yes, yes," nodded Andrei,

"I'm going with you."

He tried to control the chattering of his teeth and wondered why he was trembling although he was feeling very hot. Outside, the rumble of a lorry, voices and stamping were heard.

Andrei followed the officer out. The latter got into a small green car and beckoned to Andrei to come in beside him; then he handed him a coat. They started quickly, followed by the motor-lorry full of soldiers, on the platform of which a machine-gun had been placed. The officer took his note-book out and asked him to relate once more, taking everything down. Realizing that the boy was frozen, he handed him a flask, motioning to him to have a good draught. Andrei took about three gulps. The alcohol made him cough. Something hot ran down his body like quick-silver. But when he wanted to say something more, he was unable to do it. He was completely dizzy.

The muzzle of the car scattered on each side of the road a wave of yellow mud. The officer kept bending forward to the driver, speeding him on but to Andrei it seemed that they were still going too slowly. When the car climbed straight up the hill leading to the village, they saw several columns of black smoke rising. Somebody called from the lorry: "*Tavarish capitan.. smatrite!*" *

On a side-street, a yellow lorry appeared, covered with mud stains, full of men firing shots right and left. Then followed a town-cab drawn by four horses, full of fowls, pigs, cushions, clothes and sheepskin fur coats. The machine-gun on the Soviet lorry started thudding. The man driving the carriage collapsed, beating the air with his hands, slid into the ditch and remained there motionless. The horses got entangled in the harnesses and toppled the light car over. The yellow lorry turned heavily round, while the "guards" fired volleys of bullets at random. They rushed after it. Passing the things scattered on the road, Andrei saw Ioșca Cloambeș lying stretched out, his arms crosswise, on top of a cushion he had stained with blood.

The people began to come out of the houses, holding the car and the motor-lorry up. The crying women clung to the car, pulling at the officer's hands. The yellow lorry appeared again far away, climbing with difficulty the hill leading to the forest. When it reached the top, it skidded, collided with a lonely tree and tipped over. They saw how the men slipped away from under it, and started running towards

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* Comrade Captain, look!

the edge of the forest. The machine gun fired a long volley after them, but without any effect. They were too far away.

"Doesn't matter," the interpreter said. "We've seen exactly what they look like. Tomorrow at the latest we'll catch the whole lot of them."

The people were crowding round the cars, moaning and crying. Everybody wanted to explain what had happened.

They proceeded slowly towards the church courtyard.

"Fascists!" the interpreter told Andrei with disgust.

In the church courtyard the officer began to ask every man to make a statement. Andrei was leaning against the smooth wall. He felt very ill. Somebody stopped in front of him and shook his hand:

"Thank you... They wanted to hang the whole village. If you hadn't come, it would have been terrible!"

"The horse... Andrei whispered with difficulty. "I left it there in the village. You may take it... if you want to..."

After that he did not know what happened to him.

A single picture haunted him during his ravings: the tree trunk with blood marks, the shoulders bending down, the axe raised and its sudden dull shine. He would scream and writhe, crushing his bedding. Then, near, the trunk, the broad back of the "captain" covered with the peasant coat appeared. Sarca too fired a gun at him, but the thundering did not resound.The gun was out of order. A wounded man waved a stump of an arm, beckoning to him in a friendly way, but Andrei did not understand what he was saying: the man talked in an unknown language. From time to time, a whiff of fresh air hit his face. Somebody helped him, and when he lay down again, the bedclothes were fresh and dry, and rustled like paper. One evening he awoke. The yellowish light of a lamp fell on his eyes. A bearded face bent down towards him:

"Beso kind and tell me your name. You may die and we wouldn't know where to send word; you've got fever. I've brought you some quinine."

Andrei told him his name and address mechanically, then asked:

"How long have I been here?"

"Three days."

He went to sleep again. Time passed slowly; outside it was raining. When he awoke, Andrei looked around him in surprise. He was in a small, low, whitewashed room, in a very high bed, near the ceiling. In a corner there was a spider rocking to and fro like a pendulum at the end of a very thin, almost invisible thread. A very little girl, her head tied up in a black kerchief like an old woman, handed him a bottle:

"Drink... It's fir-tree brandy... It's good..."

Andrei got out of bed. The room began to reel, at first very quickly, then gradually slower, like the water in a glass that has been stirred.

The door opened and the man who had got the horse for him came in again. He laughed when he saw Andrei up, and nodded:

"I thought... it was all over with you... That day, near the church you turned your eyes up, and fell down limply."

He took off his short, ragged coat, drenched with the rain and shook it.

"The rain, confound it. Seems as though it's never going to stop. They caught Maniu's men in the woods. They took them to Bucharest, in chains... They'll have them hanged... What fiends the Rumanians are, may their bones rot!"

"I too am a Rumanian," Andrei mumbled weakly.

The man blushed and rubbed his face with his hands.

"I am sorry... Silly words... The mother of Ioji whom they slaughtered, has gone mad. She walks day and night about the village, calling her son and sleeping on the ground. Have a little brandy. It's good... I have no wife. I'm a widower. The priest says that from now on they'll keep coming like that and cutting our heads off."

"Don't you be afraid of that," Andrei said. He sighed, trying to get the weight off his chest. Thank you," he went on after a time. "I must go home now."

"Good gracious! Where to?"

"To Lunca."

"Impossible, young gentleman, quite impossible! You'll die on the road. You're as thin as a lath... Iuliş! Hand over the looking-glass from the window-sill... Just have a look at yourself."

A strange, drawn, greenish face with deep black rings under the eyes, with lines at the corners of the mouth, stared at Andrei. He pulled a face, put the looking-glass down and said resolutely:

"I've got to go home."

As a matter of fact he could think of nothing else. He had to go.

"And how will you get there?" the man cried anxiously. "How? My God, my God!"

"I must go."

The peasant looked insistently at him; then he understood that he was talking to him in vain.

"You know what? Wait a bit. I'll go into the village and see whether there isn't anybody going to Lunca or that way. Perhaps he'll take you. In the meantime the girl will give you a bite of food. Bread onion, eggs — that'll give you strength... Iuliş, do you hear? Bring some food. Stay here till I return."

When the man had departed hurriedly, throwing his coat over his shoulder as he went, Andrei tried to walk about the little room. At every step his knees gave way under the weight of his body. He dragged himself to the table and again took up the small blurred looking-glass which had a crack in a corner. He was horrified: he looked thirty at least. During his illness somebody had cut his hair short, and some clumsily cut streaks were standing on end like a hedgehog's spines. The few movements he had made had exhausted him. He leaned against the table and, clenching his jaws, thought: 'I must go home.' Those words conjured up no image in him. His mother's face, that of Dan, floated in a mist which was dispersing.

The little girl set the food for him on the table, and pulled him by the hand:

"Come and eat!"

Andrei was hardly able to swallow a few bits. The little girl threw some twigs on to the fire and squatted down beside the oven. She had large, sad eyes, full of earnestness.

Andrei heard the stamping of big boots outside; the door opened and the man appeared in the doorway. He looked very cheerful and said:

"You're lucky. A man from Ineu happens to be in the village. He had left a sick calf here and has come to fetch it. He said he would take you. From Ineu you'll manage somehow."

"Of course," said Andrei, listlessly trying to smile.

He rose and took up his coat, placed on the back of the rough wooden chair clumsily carved with a hatchet.

The man went into the next room and came back carrying a German military cloak.

"Here... take this. It was left here by the murderers."

"How can I thank you? You see, I don't even know your name."

"Péter Horváth," the peasant said clicking his heels. "They've killed my cousin and they would have done the same to me if they had found me. Some tale-bearer went and said that my cousin was a communist. Put those boots on. They're old but good. I stuffed straw into them..."

Leaning against his shoulder, Andrei set out down the street. In front of the pub there was a waggon with a calf lying in it, so thin that its ribs stuck out through its skin. On the seat, a small old man, his unshaven face covered with white bristles, was looking anxiously all around.

"Here, Uncle, here's the man you are to drive," Horváth said. He shook hands with Andrei gently. "Farewell..."

He helped him to get in. The waggon started.

"How ill you look," the little old man who was driving said in a pitying voice, after looking at him carefully. I am Vasalie, the son of Petre Simie. I don't know if you've heard of me. I've been to Bucharest too... Now we've run away, we are refugees, as folk say... I came as far as this village with some Hungarians. You must have heard how they were tortured by some wicked heartless scoundrels. I had left my calf there, a little bull; it is weak in the legs... Now I've come to take it, for I set great hopes on it; it may become a breeding bull. When it's grown up, I'll sell it and get four times the money... You've never seen so much money all your life... I'll get myself a house

and a little vineyard, not a big one, just enough to have something to drink from one year to the other, not too little and, not too much, just enough, to see two fur-caps instead of one."

"Listen..." Andrei mumbled, "couldn't I lie down in the waggon? I've been very ill..."

"Why not?" Uncle Vasalie said grandly. "Biju, make room," he said and pushed the calf aside, then pulled some straw out and quickly made a sort of bed for Andrei, helping him to rest his head against the board of the seat.

"I've put you like that, so you might hear me talk. I'm an old man, I've nobody to say a word to. I had a daughter, I married her off, and now she won't have anything to do with me. When I go to see them she just dumps some food down for me, but doesn't let me talk. And I'm a very wise man. I know so many things. I myself wonder where I've got them from. But it's a pity. I've been left quite by myself, and am bored to death. Now, if there's going to be politics again, I'll join the democrats, perhaps they'll make me a mayor."

The journey lasted, like that, for three days. Andrei lay stretched out in the waggon, beside the calf which was breathing heavily; he was listening, as from a great distance, to the old man's endless yarns. The latter went on talking about everything on earth: about a certain Florița Toaia, the most beautiful woman in the world, for whom, long ago, gentlemen had killed each other with swords, and he too had seen her when an infant, and she was old and wrinkled; about the war in Italy, where he had been too, and spoken Rumanian to the Italians, and they had understood everything; about his son-in-law who was a swine, a blacksmith, who made good money but didn't give him a penny, and beat his wife — the old man's daughter — from time to time, when he was worried. He described all his relations, told him where each one of them lived and what rank they held — a door-keeper at Craiova or a servant at a school in Bacău, a railway-worker at Teiuș, another whom God had punished on Good Friday. Then he remembered a priest who had done him wrong, it may be some fifteen years before, for a piece of ground they had been cultivating together.

It was a pity the priest was dead, for now he would have sued him.

In the evening the old man put up at some house, complaining in a loud voice:

"Good folk, find a small place for me and my son. He is a gentleman who's got education, and is about to die... He has had high fever. I've spent so much money keeping him in schools and now I don't know what's going to happen to him."

Andrei slept in warm beds, ate good food, while the old man told the hosts until late into the night all he had been through. When night overtook them on the road, the old man left the waggon in a sheltered place, and went to steal hay or straw from somewhere. The third day the calf died. Helped by Andrei who had got back some of his strength, Uncle Vasalie took it out of the cart, sat down beside it and looked at it intently, with bitterness, sniffing through his nostrils. Then he started skinning it, slashing the skin at random. When they set out again, he had recovered his self-confidence:

"It was God's will. It couldn't be helped. It was fated that Biju should die during the war. Now out of this hide which you can see too, I'll make myself an overcoat: even the mayor has not had a better one in his whole life. Long and pleated... After all, it might not have turned out a good bull, for it was rather weak since its mother gave birth to it. Her name was Sarga, and the German planes killed her at Gurahonț. One sometimes keeps cattle like that and then nothing comes of it."

After that he began to tell Andrei a very intricate story about some mad wolves.

At Ineu they parted, after Uncle Vasalie had taken him by force to a pub where they exchanged the hide of the calf for a bottle of wine.

"I've taken to you as to my own son," said the old man, now slightly tipsy, shaking his hand and bowing deeply. "I'd take you to my place to let you have a good rest, but I have no house, I'm all alone in this world."

Andrei found a waggon going to Şupreuş. From the carter he learned that the Russian troops were fighting near the town, and furthermore that the man had seen with

his own eyes units of Rumanian volunteers, formed of ex-prisoners. They had even had a celebration at Ineu, and a teacher from one of the neighbouring villages had made a speech.

"You are sure to know him... Teodorescu, from Lunca."

"But he's my uncle!" Andrei cried out. "My own uncle!"

"Now, I'm very glad of it, young man. They were beautifully dressed... they had Rumanian flags... It seems they fought splendidly at Oradea... Hey, our poor Rumanian lads, bless them!"

He went on telling him that several houses had been burnt in Lunca, but he did not know exactly which.

"The people have come back from their wanderings and settled down to their business. The big bridge over the Criş had been blown up with dynamite. The villagers worked for days on end to restore it... Now the Russians pass day and night, endlessly. Never has there been such a lot of soldiers — never, not since the world exists... Otherwise, all's well, only we'll suffer a bit from hunger. The crops are ruined and the enemy have carried everything away with them, like locusts. It doesn't matter, as long as there's peace, we'll put everything back as it was."

From Şupreuş Andrei set out on foot for home. The road was broken up, dug deep down to its foundations by the caterpillars of the tanks, by the wheels of the lorries. In the fields the still ungathered maize rustled in the harsh cold wind. Grey fog floated above, while in the bare trees the rooks were cawing deafeningly, sailing up like a volley of pieces of coal when Andrei passed by. He walked on exhausted, his eyes fixed in front of him. He passed some burned sheds, skirted the dark forest, and the well-known endless plain appeared before his eyes.

Far away, he saw the village dwarfed in the autumn mist guarded by the church steeple above which the rooks floated like a noisy cloud.

Andrei began to run. He climbed up the hillock. The Teuz had grown, and flowed slimily and brown amidst dry reeds. All around, the place was deserted. Not a waggon, not a man, no creature was to be seen anywhere. Only rooks rose from everywhere, cawing angrily.

His heart beating fast, Andrei entered the village and walked along the street which led to the school, quicker... quicker... quicker...

In a few minutes he would be home. In the middle of the courtyard, the black marks left by a fire; the small fences round the coops, the door of the stable, the barn had been burnt down; in the school passage traces of muddy hobnailed boots had dried. There was the house. It had no door left. He entered the kitchen and stood petrified: the big white oven had been pulled down. Bricks and dirty straw lay scattered about the place. Grandmother's old clock was hanging crookedly on the wall, pierced by bullets, its chains entangled. In the bedroom the bedsteads and the wardrobes were smashed to pieces, the carpets cut up in shreds. On the walls, all kind of obscene drawings, or inscriptions and signatures. Along the walls the soldiers had done their needs. The window-panes were broken, the curtain stained with blood.

"Mother," cried Andrei, "mother!"

The echo rang hollowly.

He went out into the yard. Then he saw a thin thread of smoke rising from the chimney of the summer kitchen. He rushed there and went in stumbling against the high doorstep. Crouching beside a small stove, his grandmother was frying a piece of bacon. The fat fell down on the hot embers, sizzled and exhaled a pungent smell.

"Granny!"

She rose slowly, came up to him, feeling his face with her wrinkled hands, and with unsuspected strength embraced him. The tears ran down from her reddened eyes, along her wrinkles.

"My poor little boy... my poor little boy..." she whispered then, hugging him with all her strength to her meagre breast, she rested her hands on his shoulders and said to him: "Your mother's dead..."

CHAPTER XVII

As clumsy and heavy as a stone, the crow alighted on a branch. From the black cyanic boughs a thin shower of glittering drops fell off splashing in the mud. The graves were stripped of grass, as if washed by the rain trying to penetrate through their mounds, deep down to the wooden coffins fermenting in the humming dampness of the earth. Everywhere water was oozing, on the nearly obliterated footpaths, under the thin rugged trunks of the bare acacias; far off, where the endless plain lost itself in a dim fogginess, pools of water shone dully, wrinkled by the wind, like a quivering, damp skin...

Wrapped up in the long, wide military cloak, Andrei stood for a long time beside his mother's grave. A cross, carefully carved with the axe, on which an awkward hand had written:

ANA SABIN, n. MOȚ
1899—1944
REST IN PEACE!

The rain had soaked the earth and the cross was leaning to one side. Careful not to step on the grave, Andrei put it straight. He thrust it deep into the earth, resting on it with all his might, then stuck his wet hands into his pockets. The note a railwayman had brought him yesterday rustled. His father had written: "Andrei, come; father is all alone and very unhappy."

Nearly three weeks had elapsed since he had come home. He had slept like a log for days on end, getting up only to eat, listlessly. His aunt was at a loss what to do with him. She would turn around him, talking to him in whispers as if he were ill, begging him to take some nourishment, and then, quite unexpectedly, would break into loud sobs, wiping her eyes quickly and asking him to forgive her. She would not leave him alone for a single moment. She also told herself that the boy certainly must feel the need to weep, and would go to the village, from where she would come back late at night, her spirits somewhat revived, but as soon as she entered the house, everything came back to her and she would again give way to despair. She would wake up at night and come to Andrei's bed and, crying, would stroke his thin hands, talking uninterruptedly:

"Don't worry, auntie's darling, don't worry... We'll look after you, we'll give you everything... You are now... my child, as you have always been... You are clever and handsome, you'll get on... In two years you'll go up to the University in Bucharest with Dan. I'll find you lodgings fit for princes, I'll fit you out with the best I'll find. Do you know that your uncle George is free now? He'll be back soon. We'll both work for the two of you..."

Andrei would stare at the dark ceiling and slide his fingers gently over her soft round arm, but could not utter a single word.

For days on end he lay stretched out, covered up to his chin, feeling with the palms of his hands the fabric of the sheet. Dan would come and see him; he would stop perplexed in the middle of the room, cough, clear his throat, smile sheepishly and at last ask him:

"I say, old man, don't you want me to give you a cigarette, or a book of adventures? I think they'd do you good."

But Andrei would make no answer. He thought of absolutely nothing: he listened to the tense silence within him.

One day the door opened gently, creaking. He heard how a chair was being dragged along the bare floor, then the dry voice of the old woman resounded:

"Open your eyes, my darling boy, and look at me."

Andrei gazed at her in surprise. The grandmother had seated herself on the edge of the chair, had folded her thin hands in her lap, and sat holding herself very straight. She was so small that she looked like a dwarf, so shrunken up was she.

"I want to tell you how your mother died. Lie there, rest, don't rise. At Gurba the Hungarians caught them and they turned back. We had taken shelter with the neighbours, for here the Hungarians stayed for five days. She wept the whole day long, racking her brain, thinking what may have happened to you; even at night she could not sleep. She was afraid you'd died. She got thin, she didn't eat any more. The day we moved back into the house she fell down in the courtyard and died. Her heart kept aching her, like it did your grand-dad Mihai, may God rest them both in a peaceful, verdant place. That was how your mother died, Andrei."

She was silent and bent her head slowly, resting her chin on her chest.

"Our kinsman Ţulea made a fir coffin for her. We put on her breast a picture of yours when you were little, that she might sleep peacefully. After a week we held the usual service for the repose of her soul. It would have been better if *I* had died. Now, my son, you've been left all alone. You must take care of your father too, for, oh, Lord! his mind is fieble. He hasn't been able to build

himself even a small house as all people have... He's got a very kind heart. When he was here, a week after the burial, I thought he would soon breathe his last, he cried and moaned that much. I don't know how he's getting on now that your mother isn't there to look after him. Now here is what I've been thinking... I've got a few acres left to me from Palli. When I die, I'll leave them to you, that you may have something too."

"I don't need them," Andrei muttered, but she went on as if she hadn't heard:

"Don't talk like a child. You must have a few acres that nobody should look down on you as if you were a beggar. I'm glad I told Anuța too about my plans."

Andrei began to cry, gently, quietly, sobbing childishly.

"I've buried many," the old woman murmured. "My mother, my father, Mihai, six children, my sister, Todor, Palli, your mother... We all die... God will forgive us our sins, for we've been poor people. Sleep and pull yourself together and afterwards, tomorrow or the day after, you'll go back home. We'll give you everything, bread, sausages, ham, flour, that you won't suffer from hunger, because people in town are starving."

When he got up for the first time one morning and went out into the muddy yard, Andrei felt as if he missed something. Yes, he missed the question which had annoyed him ever since he had grown up: "Have you slept well, Andrei?"

Then he realized that his mother had died.

The kitchen was deserted, cold, terribly untidy with dirty dishes, broken cups, rusty spoons thrown about everywhere.

He crouched on the hard bed beside the cold oven. He must go.

At parting, his aunt loaded him with all kinds of good things, a bag full of them. She slipped several thousand lei notes into his coat-pocket, and looked so embarrassed as if Andrei, by accepting them, had rendered her a great service. Once in town he was to write when the schools were to open, that Dan might come too. His grandmother took him aside, gave him solemnly all her money which she counted into his hand and said to him:

"Go through the graveyard. The grave is next to that of your granddad Mihai. Pray for her, for she had few joys in her lifetime... She has had only you."

Dan accompanied him as far as the end of the village.

He was carrying clumsily a parcel wrapped up in newspaper. They were silent. In front of the church, Andrei said to him gently:

"Now go, Dan."

He embraced him and saw his cousin's big brown eyes brimming with tears.

"Here..." Dan said, giving him the parcel. "Here is... that navy blue stuff... I've got enough clothes..."

He thrust it under his arm and, turning quickly away, set out, splashing the mud all over the place.

Andrei found the grave easily. He put his bag and the parcel down, and stood motionless, his arms hanging down. He was swaying gently. 'She had few joys in her lifetime...' he heard as out of the depth the voice of the very old woman who was his grandmother.

And memories began to wrench themselves free, calling one another. At the age of six he had been ill and his parents had gone to a dance given by the railway people. His father, powdered and perfumed, was fidgeting about restlessly, afraid they would be late, urging his mother who could not tear herself away from his bed. ('All children have such remembrances — small worries, small humiliations — when they feel that they are not the centre of the world,' he thought.) He had not been able to sleep, he had a temperature. Towards eleven o'clock his mother had hurried back.

"Where's father?" Andrei had asked.

"He's staying on a little longer; you know how daddy is... He likes having a good time. He'll bring you chocolate cakes... Won't you try and sleep?"

"No, I won't... Why didn't you take me to the dance?"

"Do you want mother to read you some poetry?"

"Yes."

And her voice broke with emotion:

"Over the crests the moon is sailing,
The forest deep is softly wailing
And where the alder-trees abound,
A horn melancholy does sound. . ."

"What does 'melancholy' mean?"

"Something sad, very sad, Andrei. . . Don't you want to go to sleep?"

"No. Read me the part in which they beat the Turks. That's what I like best."

In the morning his father had arrived in a hurry, covered all over with confetti; he had stopped beside his bed and tearful with anxiety had asked him:

"How do you feel, sonny? You feel better, don't you?" And he had placed on the small table by the bed eight pounds of tangerines which he had bought with money borrowed right and left.

Soon his mother had given up going to any party. Andrei heard much later the little tragedy in his parents' life, every time they went to some party: Octavian felt at his best as soon as he entered the lighted hall. His friends would rush up to him, calling and beckoning to him. In a twinkling he was seated at a table which the musicians joined quickly, knowing his tastes. When the leader of the orchestra struck up *Little Star*, *The Monk in the Old Monastery* or *At the Side of My Grave*, Sabin looked quickly round that his wife should not see him, then slipped all his money into the fiddler's pocket and relieved, raised his beautiful, resounding voice. He sang and emptied glass after glass, in a state of gentle bliss until several hours later, when Ana would come to him, bored and worried because of the child she had left at home, to ask him to go home. He became gloomy, concealed his irritation under a smile and said softly:

"Mummy, just a few minutes. . . a wee quarter of an hour. . . Janci dear, sing that one, you know which one: *In the Clearing by the Vineyard.*" He bent to his wife's ear, whispering sentimentally: "Do you remember, mother, how I used to sing it to you?. . ."

A year ago... a long time since...

And she let him be. Although stout, Octavian danced without ever tiring. When he heard *The Danube Waves*, a thrill passed through his veins... That was the time when he was courting a very pretty clerk married to an old friend of the family, Andru, a plain-looking, unhappy fellow. Neither Andru nor Ana could dance. They sat at a table in a corner, a piece of cake before them, and looked at the two turning round and round, drunk with rapture.

Afterwards, Andrei's mother never went anywhere any more. She always stayed with Andrei, told him stories, read him pages out of Jules Verne. They made plans for the future. Sabin came at dawn, whistling so loud that the whole empty street resounded. Near the gate he stopped and started walking on tiptoe.

When Andrei was about fourteen, he understood with bitterness that his parents did not get on well, that they were ill-matched that, if it had not been for him, they maybe would have arranged their lives in a different manner, but now it was too late.

Andrei grew up and changed. He had read a great deal, he knew many things and no longer found what to say to his mother. So many new roads had opened up suddenly in his life: his first friendship, his first love, doubts about the existence of God... It seemed to him that his mother was not well-read enough to understand him. He felt that he was hurting her by this remoteness, but could not help it, at least that was what he thought. He had grown cold, silent, even rude sometimes when his mother, forgetting that he was no longer a child, fondled him and talked to him sweetly, as of old. Once, when he was walking arm in arm with Sonia they had met. That day his mother had been very sad. Andrei was angry... 'Why doesn't she understand that I'm grown up now, that I too have a right to live my own life...' And many and many things had been left untold...

'She had few joys in her lifetime...' Now nothing could be put right any more. Andrei went away slowly, dragging his feet heavily out of the soft soil. The wet road stretched out before him. The village was left far

behind, small and gloomy. Only in the very middle of the dull sky a patch of light opened, through which feeble yellowish sun-rays were striving to break through.

The journey, which in former times lasted two hours at the utmost, took two whole days now. At every station, the train crammed with a roaring crowd that had even climbed onto the buffers, the steps and the roofs, was shunted to a side-line. In the compartments the velvet or the leather of the seats had been cut out, the windows broken and replaced with wooden bars nailed crosswise. The travellers slept for whole days on sacks, travelling bags, bundles; they did their needs wherever they happened to be. As soon as the train stopped, they invaded the villages trying to buy anything: rancid bacon, rotten eggs, mouldy flour, budding onions or dried prunes. Most of the men were drunk: all of them had bottles of plum-brandy or grain alcohol, very strong disgusting stuff. Quarrels broke out, fights were started, and now and then revolver shots and women's screams were heard. At night, dancing parties started on the roofs: people felt the need to enjoy themselves. Some loose woman shrieked passing from one man to another. On the side of the railway lines fires were kindled with young trees torn out of the ground, with straw stolen out of courtyards or with boards from the railway trucks. The flickering flames licked the sides of the train, but nobody cared. A young man clad in a military uniform — a deserter probably — was playing a splendid Hohner accordion with six registers. He was the train's hero. People came to him with food and drink, so that the soldier was permanently dead drunk, but played all the more beautifully very sad tunes.

Andrei had got on to a roofless goods-truck laden with wheat, which the trains were carting from place to place. He buried himself up to his neck in the grain, and did not feel the cold. On the main line, trains full of Soviet troops, tanks, field-guns, lorries, cars, long, heavy boats, pontoons, ack-ack machine-guns, ambulances, kitchens, radio-stations, horses, carts, kept passing continuously. On the second day the traces of war began to appear beside the earthwork. Charred tank skeletons were

scattered over the ravaged field, ruined guns raised to the sky their rusty muzzles filled with water, heaps of ammunition, shells, hand-grenades and chests full of cartridges were left lying about everywhere, as well as broken weapons, the burned frames of airplanes, bullet-riddled German helmets, caissons without wheels. Here and there, the corpse of a horse as swollen as a barrel, which the rooks were picking clean of flesh. Packs of famishing dogs, their hair bristling and their ribs sticking out through their skin, prowled about, snuffing at the corpses buried barely two or three feet deep. They dug quickly with their claws, then caught hold of a leg covered by a boot and tore at it, wild with hunger. Far away, on the outskirts of the dark-brown field broken up as by a giant rake, burnt villages could be seen, trees with their branches torn and half demolished church-steeples. And at every station crowds of people swarmed about, hurled themselves onto the train, fought, bit, clawed to make room for themselves. Two drunken men who were scuffling rolled down from the roof. One was caught under the wheels, the other lay looking stunned at the heap of bleeding flesh; the train, however, did not stop.

At Şimand they were told that the train was not going any further. A chorus of shouts arose, several men jumped down from the railway-carriages and rushed to beat the station-master up; they pursued him, waving clubs as far as his office, whence the latter appeared with a sporting rifle which he pointed at them. Andrei got out of the wheat, all numb, lifted his bags onto his shoulder and started along the concrete road, in the midst of a convoy which had just formed. He had only one thought, a haunting thought — to reach home at last.

Around him, people spoke to one another, relating their adventures; they told each other the villages where one could get supplies, but they mainly recounted things that had happened, so that Andrei walking amidst them learned heaps of things: how the Soviet tanks had appeared from Lipova when nobody was expecting them, how the chaotic race of the Germans staying in the town had started. Towards Curtici the columns had been met by detachments of communist partisans who opened fire on them;

Fritsch the chemist, of whom it was said that he was a *Gestapo* agent, was running away in a long general-staff car, together with his daughter Erika whom he had dressed up in a SS uniform. The car was riddled by machine-gun fire, and the girl shot. Howling, Fritsch had undressed her, but the girl was dead. He had started towards the town, carrying tight in his arms her heavy white body. Andrei knew the girl from the skating rink where she used to come, always accompanied by a young German officer. She was aloof and proud, and used to skate in a short velvet dress which showed her long beautiful legs clad in grey silk stockings.

Then they talked about Serbian partisans who had filled the town; about the disaster of a Hussar division at Beliu, where they had been bombed by Stuka planes captured when the Rumanians had occupied the air field; about the robberies and crimes on the unlit outskirts of the town; about a gang which murdered and undressed everybody, and raped all the women. The police and Soviet patrols had been after them for a week; there had even been fights, with dead and wounded.

About noon the convoy sat down on the road-side in the mud, and the people began to eat and drink.

"Thank Heaven it's peace!"

"God helpus!"

"Here's to you, and a long life!"

"Amen."

"Say, have you heard anything about the Iron Guard? People say there was a division which came with the Germans and has stayed on here, in the forests... It's said they've put on Russian uniforms."

"Drink some of this nice brandy..."

Andrei ate quickly. He wanted to get on. A woman in a blue coat trimmed with astrakhan, and a dirty military cap pulled down over her ears, came up to him, rocking to and fro, sat down without ceremony and pinched his chin:

"Are we gloomy, duckie? So sweet, and yet gloomy?"

Andrei raised his face up to her and smiled in a strange way. She looked at him abashed, then went away, trying hard to walk straight.

Towards dusk, after about two hours' walk, the town came into sight. Out of the factory chimneys, from the railway stations, waves of black smoke floated lazily, sprawling out; it seemed as if a dull grey halo weighed down on the whole town. The suburbs were deserted, the houses had no fences, no doors, their roofs riddled by shells, their windows staring like eye-sockets from which the eyes had been drained, the walls besprinkled with the pink holes the bullets had left. Across the road a small tank was overturned, and next to it, like the skeleton of a camel, the yellow coach of a roadster, full of water. The streets were deserted.

"The people have moved into the centre of the town, with relations or friends," a man sweating under the weight of a heavy potato sack told Andrei. "One can't stay here. All kinds of people have turned up...

Andrei started for home, passing through the part of the town that had been bombed. He was treading on finely crushed splinters, on broken bricks, and his foot-steps rang unusually loud, as if he had been the only living creature about. From a pile of rubble he saw a thin thread of smoke rising, then in the big shop-window of what had been the great ironmongery "Bulzan and Sons," he saw a family settled down. They had made their bed in a zinc tub, and they were just pulling down the half burned and twisted blind. When he crossed the park, he heard steps behind him, and a harsh voice ordering:

"You, there, stop a moment!"

He took his revolver quickly out of his pocket and turned round. A vagabond in rags, a red beard invading his cheek-bones high up to his eyes, stopped in terror; he touched the peak of his greasy cap and mumbled:

"A match... by any chance?..."

"I haven't any!" snapped Andrei.

He went on. He heard the steps of the tramp pitter-pattering along an alley, then a whistle.

He took to his heels. Only when he came out of the park did he stop to get back his breath, wet through with perspiration.

The dark empty streets were ghostly. Not the least sparkle of light shone through the windows; all the gates were locked.

He reached their street. Here too the walls had been perforated by bullets, the trees uprooted by tank caterpillars, the lamp-posts bent. He heard somebody locking the gate hurriedly, and he rushed up and began to beat with his fists. He shouted:

"Open the door. It's me... Andrei... Sabin..."

"Master Andrei!" Iurcovici's wife cried from inside. "Wait, wait... I'll open the gate in a sec!"

When she saw him, she stood petrified, then began to weep:

"Oh my! Master Andrei, the poor lady... It's lucky you've come back. What things are going on here... Everybody's mad... Ludovic too has joined the communists... I said to him: 'Wait, man.' But he wouldn't listen to anything."

"Father..."

"Oh, what a pity. I don't know what'll happen to poor Mr. Sabin. He drinks and drinks the whole day long without stopping. All by himself. He drinks and sings. The whole house is so sorry for him. I've sent my husband to go and talk to him, in case he'd... God forbid... He must provide for you. Somebody has been asking about you — a young lady and a gentleman."

The door of the passage was open. All the small coloured window-panes had been broken. There was a light in the kitchen. Andrei rushed towards it like a whirlwind, opened the door wide and called:

"Father... Faaather... I'm back!"

From the table covered with bottles, demijohns, onions and bits of bacon, a puffed-up face, the small eyes sunk deep into their sockets, the thin hair sticking to the pink top of the head, raised itself towards him.

"Father!"

Sabin made as if to get up, but upset a bottle, and the wine trickled along the table, then ran down gurgling.

A burst of tearless sobs shook Sabin. He stretched both arms out to Andrei who cuddled at his chest.

After a long while he tore himself gently away from Sabin's arms which were trying to hold him back. Dirty, unshaven, the thick ruddy bristles of his beard growing

down to his neck, Sabin looked the shadow of what he used to be. It was cold and close in the kitchen, and it smelt unbearably of wine.

"I haven't been beside her... to tell her..." the old man groaned; then he fell limply on the chair. He filled himself a glass to the brim and drank it dowm spilling some of it on his shirt-front.

"Father, let's light a fire..."

Sabin waved his hand listlessly and asked him hoarsely:

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes, very!" lied Andrei.

"Don't worry... Father'll make fire and cook food for you... now, immediately... only let father get up... for he's drunk... Don't be afraid, my boy, father'll provide for you... father'll do everything for you, you won't be in want of anything..."

He tried to get up twice, but fell back on the small bed. Then, frowning, he gathered up all his strength and rose, walking through the kitchen without swaying. He kindled the fire.

Andrei sat down on the edge of a chair, without taking his coat off. He leaned his forehead on his hands. He heard the fat sizzling in the pan, and the shuffling about of his father's feet. He was not tired, but wanted to sleep, to sleep endlessly. They ate in silence. The fat was trickling down Sabin's chin, but he didn't bother to wipe it away. He took a big glass out of the cupboard, put it before Andrei, filled it up and said to him:

"Drink with father... Now you're grown up..."

The thick, sweetish, sticky wine made Andrei dizzy. The piercing pain, which had cut his breath, had dispersed with thousands of needles in his whole body, together with an oppressive warmth.

"How old you have grown, Andrei!" Sabin said puckering up his eyelids to get a better view of him. "You have grown thin... Father'll get you good food, so that you should grow fat." And, leaning across the table, he wanted to stroke his hand but gripped it instead. His father's fingers were hot and very soft and velvety. Andrei poured wine again into the glasses. It was better like that, to drink and not be obliged to say anything.

The walls, painted a light green, began to dance; the dim light of the bulb twinkled from time to time. The blood beat slowly in his arteries, as steadily as a clock. . .

"Let's drink," said Andrei.

His father looked at him reproachfully.

"Don't get into the habit of drinking. It's no good. . ." And he suddenly fell asleep.

Mustering his strength, Andrei laid him down on the small wooden bed and covered him up with his own coat and with an old short fur-coat all worn and moth-eaten. He went into the bedroom: it had not been aired for weeks, but he had no time to do it now. He opened the wardrobe. His mother's chemises, coats, dresses were all arranged in order, spread with small dried-up branches of lavender — a discreet sad scent which had accompanied every one of Ana's movements. He buried his face in the old dresses altered dozens of times, and passed his fingers over the soft materials worn out at places. He would have liked to be able to weep, to call her, to cry out to her, but he could not. He felt as if his whole body were a hollow bell in which his blood, let loose, was throbbing with a prolonged wail.

CHAPTER XVIII

Every day the trains which were coming most irregularly poured out crowds of people into the ruined station, on the untidy platforms littered with all sorts of rubbish. The last refugees were returning without the luggage they had taken with them; ragged and dirty pedlars with all sorts of foodstuffs coming to do good business, soldiers who had lost touch with their units and were looking for them, at random.

On the asphalt square in front of the station, among débris of cars and rusty tanks bargains were struck, reports were circulated about trucks of sugar left standing somewhere on the railway-line, about tank waggons loaded

with alcohol, or about strayed cattle collected from the fields and left at some deserted estate under the care of armed men. All sorts of barters were concluded: military cycles for a kilo and a half of potatoes; a travelling bag full of Swedish shaving blades for a demijohn of plum-brandy; five hens for an automatic gun without its loader; a basketful of eggs for a bullet-riddled leather coat. Most times the exchange ended with shots fired to stress the supply and demand. The crowd dispersed howling, only to flock together immediately around the dead or wounded man; hasty hands searched for his papers and took the opportunity to possess themselves of his watch, money or revolver. From time to time, lorries passed hooting, on which "Everything for the Front! Everything for Victory!" was written in whitewash. The people looked wonderingly at them. Why, here the war had already come to an end! Now it was being waged somewhere near Debreczen or Szegedin. In the night, two or three German planes came and dropped bombs at random, just to cause a panic. The Soviet artillery opened fire, the whole sky was a sea of flames, cross-hatched by the red trails of the Very-lights or by the straight flashes of the searchlights. Several planes were brought down: one fell into the Mureş, by the bridge, the others God knows where, in the fields.

Every day some dare-devil fellows crossed the destroyed bridge that led to the Citadel. The people thronged on the bank to look at them like at Stroszneider the acrobat. In the Citadel there were thousands of bicycles, arms, ammunition, fodder and Hungarian military uniforms left hastily behind when the *Katiushas* had begun to fire. Revolvers especially were in great demand; everybody wanted to be armed. At night, shots cracked on all sides. Some children playing in the fields had been blown to pieces by the explosion of a shell; a teacher living in the outskirts of the town had tried to fish with hand grenades in the Mureş and — not knowing how to pull the fuse — had been blown up; a rocket had taken fire in the pocket of a smartly dressed gentleman who, terrified, was tearing along the street his clothes on fire, shouting for a bucket of water. And everybody drank, as if consumed by a huge thirst; they tried to forget in inebriation the dreadful things

they had gone through. In the evening the bodies of the drunk lay about everywhere — in the gutter along the pavement, in the mud, on the steps of the churches, in damaged cars, in dustbins, or right in the middle of the pavement. The publicans did splendid business. People drank anything: methylated spirits *Eau-de-Cologne*, all sorts of plum-brandies, wines, French brandies, mixed with whatever they happened to find.

The most fantastic reports were circulated and believed: there was talk about a butcher who caught children, killed them and made them into all kinds of sausages, about foxes as large as tigers that were said to have appeared in the outskirts of the town, about secret organizations meeting in deserted shelters; ex-nazis greeted one another symbolically with the figures 88 (that is, twice the eigth letter of the alphabet: H H — *Heil Hitler*); there was talk about some terrific new German weapons, among which an enormous mirror capable of concentrating all the heat coming from the sun to burn whole cities at any distance; about the rays of death, about an extraordinary bomb, about rebel peasants who were said to have killed a landowner — some said he was a Rumanian, others, a Hungarian — and divided his estate. ('Just as in 1919, my good sir, like in 1919 with Béla Kun's hordes. . . Dreadful things are ahead of us!') The news spread that Rommel was not dead, but that he had been appointed commander-in-chief of the eastern front and had ordered gas to be poured into the Danube, in order to set fire to all its tributaries; some one had seen a vampire cutting off the breast of a woman with a razor and sucking her blood; the vampire wore a violet cloak and had the muzzle of a bat. Then people calmed down, hearing that a cavalry officer, whose *fiancée* the monster had stolen, had killed him in a duel.

And the town was having no end of a time. The most disgracefully obscene songs were all the rage.

One day an American plane, which had got damaged over Vienna, landed on the airport. The pilots, tall lads with cow-boy guns flapping against their thighs, passed through the town followed by a host of children and schoolboys, dumb with admiration, staring at an athletic Negro

who with a very dignified air was smoking a cigar. In the evening the news spread that the Americans had scuffled with the Russians and that there had been shooting on both sides (there were even eye-witnesses). To the great disappointment of some the next day the American pilots had a snapshot taken of themselves arm in arm with Soviet pilots.

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Giddy with the oppressive smell of the carriage he had been travelling in, Suslănescu alighted on the platform at the very moment when a procession bearing banners, crucifixes and baldachins was crossing the square, heading for Maria-Radna. He stood on the pavement, scratching himself furiously — the lice were biting him — looking at the long line of people advancing and singing monotonously. Close to the procession, cripples were hobbling along, rocking between their crutches. Women with kerchiefs pulled down over their eyes, were crying plaintively "Marie, Marie!" a ruddy priest was incensing while talking over his shoulder to the gap-toothed chanter who was trying hard to sing... One could only hear a monotonous shuffle interrupted by the wailing of the old women or by the stamping of the wooden soles. The line of people seemed interminable, and Suslănescu finally passed through it. Then he made for his house, looking with wondering eyes at the city which had changed so much. A shop-window returned him his grotesque image. Instead of a coat he was wearing a sack into which he had cut holes for his head and arms. The ragged trousers hung over the top of his leather leggings. His toes stuck out of torn grimy tennis-shoes. He walked quickly, keeping near the walls, terrified at the thought that he might meet some acquaintance. He kept stopping, however, trying to drink in the sight of the houses, people and pavements. He could not get rid of the curiosity with which he had looked at the first detachment of Soviet soldiers, three weeks before: every time he saw them he stepped aside, glued himself to the wall, but followed them afterwards. He would have liked to understand what these victorious soldiers could be speaking of, thinking of. And the fact that he understood nothing made him consider

them as somewhat mysterious men come from far away, from an unknown world.

He was so weak that he could hardly walk. He had been travelling in scores of trains, he had been shot at, thrown out of a carriage, he had slept by the roadside; like the others, he had stolen, prompted by hunger. His only dream now was a clean room filled up with knick-knacks, a hot bath, and then Marie's warm body, a writhing convulsion into which he would lose himself, hide himself, forget himself. Since he had started for home, he thought of her as of a wife waiting for him thrilled with desire.

The gloominess and the dirt of the streets almost made him run. When he recognized the fence, the garden, the steps, the door with its blue curtains, a flood of tears came into his eyes, blinding him. He rushed forward like mad, knocking his shoulder against the gate, climbed up the step, pushed the entrance door open with all his weight and fell inside. The familiar smell, so dear to him, stunned him. That very moment the door of Velceanu's study opened and a Soviet officer appeared on the threshold. Suslănescu stood still and turned livid. The officer took a step towards him, threateningly. Not knowing what he was saying, Suslănescu tried to explain in French:

"*C'est ici que je demeure, monsieur, je suis l'un de locataires. Je reviens... du refuge. Permettez-moi de me presenter: le professeur Suslănescou...*"

"*Gospoja!*" the officer shouted, turned on his heels and entered the study.

Mimi appeared in the kitchen door, dressed in a very smart tailor suit. Suslănescu dashed towards her. Mimi shrieked, then recognizing him, began to laugh.

"I say, what a surprise! Mr.Suslănescu! Aurel, Aurel, come quickly and see who's come!"

Velceanu put out his pale head wrapped in a motley silk turban, looked at him and said calmly.

"So you're back? Excuse me not shaking hands, but you must be covered with lice... And you know... the epidemics... We'll ask Fira to prepare a bath for you right away. Are you going out, dear?" he said turning to Mimi who was pulling on her gloves.

"Yes, I'm paying a call. Change your clothes quickly," she said to Suslănescu with a smile, "go to bed, have some sleep, do what you want. Have lunch with Aurel *a la fortune du pot*. Today I've been frivolous, I've not been a good housewife."

Suslănescu was looking fixedly towards the door of the study.

"Oh!" laughed Mimi, "it's Mihail Alexandrovich, a lieutenant in the Air Force. He has been billeted with us, as you say nowadays. The whole quarter is full. He's a wonderful young man, very refined and reserved. Ta-ta to both of you. I'm late already."

She was off. Velceanu retired leaving him alone. After a while came Fira, an old wrinkled peasant-woman. She patted her mouth with her hand, wonderingly.

"Dear me, sir, you look like Laie the gipsy, you do indeed... I've heated some water for you. Have a good wash. Dear me — she began to laugh — you're like a bugbear, indeed you are. Throw these rags off and I'll set fire to them in the yard. You're going alone to the bathroom."

When he plunged his filthy body in the china tub, Suslănescu thought he would die with pleasure. Yet he was sick at heart. He had been wanting Mimi so much, his own Marie, that he could hardly control himself. And she... Would everything be again as it had been before? Had the war, the chaos, the unleashed animality not meant a purifying bath? Or maybe the others did not understand. Yes, that must be it, this accounted for everything. Mimi goes to pay a call now, when he, her lover, has returned, as if they had last seen one another the day before or this very morning. Her departure, her tailor suit, her stockings, her gloves, her dainty undies seemed to him symbolic, the desperate but unconscious anachronism of eternal womanhood. 'After a few years women like Mimi will only be remembrances or maybe not even that. We shall wear hides, we shall devour raw meat and we'll couple in the bushes, in spring and in autumn.' This picture hurt him, but gave him a strange pleasure at the same time. While he was drying himself, he thought of the officer living in their house, and his heart started beating faster

with fear. 'Who knows, but he might be some commissar or from the G.P.U., and in that case... But, for goodness sake, I have a lot of dangerous books, of historical studies, I have a whole library about Napoleon, the enemy of the Russians.' He dressed hurriedly, not waiting to enjoy the feeling of having fine, clean, soft clothes on. 'Culture will be the greatest enemy of the oncoming times,' he was saying to himself, trying to calm the sharp pain he felt in his chest.

He entered his room and, sitting on the floor, began to take out the books from the cases.

"Oh, Lord, what a lot of subversive books, illustrated German history and architecture books; Italian religious paintings of the Renaissance. What was it that Marx had said?: 'Religion is opium for the people,' or that poet — he couldn't remember his name — 'We shall mount to heaven and shoot God'... Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci... Dürer, a German! Arno Brecker with his Siegfrieds and Brunhildes, a Nazi. Whenever had he collected all these? In fact he was not guilty, a historian should know everything. Oh, and history..."

He gathered all the books, covering himself with dust, and ran to the kitchen after having watched the door of the study. He opened the small door of the cast-iron stove and began thrusting them in. The red, lively flames seized the leaves. Out of a glittering page rolled up by the heat Napoleon's image looked at him distantly. Suslănescu gulped and thrust the books into the fire, one after the other. The heat made his clean-shaven face glow, causing it to smart. Into the fire! Into the fire with culture! Into the fire with art! Into the fire!

"Dear me, sir, have you gone mad?" cried Fira from the door. She dashed to the kitchen-range and took out a tray in which the remains of a chared chicken were smoking. "What will the master say now we are left without any food?"

Suslănescu looked at her, his eyes red with the smoke.

"Let it burn!" he cried. "Let everything burn!"

When there was only a pile of ashes left from all his books, Suslănescu raked it up with the poker, and then went to bed. The open doors of the cupboards, with the shelves bare of books, seemed to grin pathetically and

repulsively, like an old toothless man who had forgotten that he should not laugh. He slept soundly till the next morning when, thrilled with desire, he entered Mimi's bed room. But he stepped back from the door, for Velceanu was in bed reading. Mimi indolently hid her bare foot beneath the quilt and said encouragingly:

"Come, come, Mr. Suslănescu, draw nearer. We have so much to tell one another. You know, not for a moment did I believe that you had died there under the tramcar," she said with a laugh. "I had a tremendous lot of adventures afterwards. I returned home and have stayed here all the time. It's been dreadful," she said with the shadow of a smile. "You're looking at Aurel?" (Velceanu's head was bandaged.) "He has suffered a slight accident. A kerosene lamp took fire and it has almost burnt his face. And what about you?"

"I have lived, madam," he said repeating the answer of the *abbé de Sieyès*. ('Oh, if only you were alone, that I might steal in beside you, Marie, Marie, and kiss your warm, sacred body... and forget. I need so much to forget! My soul is a wind-beaten waste, my heart is a wound where there is only place left for you, for a little tenderness and I beg it of you, Marie, with all that is left human in me.')

"I ask so little," he whispered unwittingly, and was scared.

"I beg your pardon?" said Mimi.

"Oh, nothing, nothing. I meant to say that classes would soon begin at the high school... quite so, at the high school, and all would be as before..."

"That's what you think," said Velceanu coldly, without taking his eyes from the book. "It means that the history you kno wis not worth — excuse my saying so — a farthing. There is talk about radical dismissals among the personnel in all spheres of life. We, who have done only our duty, will have to answer for the crimes committed by the bigwigs who had the *jus deliberando*. I told you, don't you remember, as early as the night of August 23, that we shall not be able to reap the benefit of our 'knack' for turning coats..."

"As Joachim du Bellay puts it: '*les ages de pleur et de damnation*' are coming," said Suslănescu. He rose.

"You'll excuse me. I must be off, I want to go and see what's new in town, and meet my colleagues."

He went out. He was so sad, so at a loss, that the thought of calling on Father Potra seemed to him a salvation. The priest was enough of a fanatic to be able to find words of encouragement which do you good even if you laugh at them.

It was Potra himself who opened the door to him and stood amazed for a second at the changes on Suslănescu's face. Then he clasped him in his arms, in silence, with a long, funereal countenance.

"Come in, my dear fellow, come in."

Deeply moved, Suslănescu said to him while they were going upstairs:

"Do you remember the good old times when we used to hide at your place? We were looking forward to something and..."

"Why, but this something has already come," said Potra uncorking a bottle of wine. "Now our duty, the teachers' duty, is to take our mission seriously and not only preach, but practise virtue as well. ('Virtue is nonsense.' Suslănescu thought while he was nodding so as not to interrupt him.) New generations will rise. They will have to be very pure in soul. We ourselves have to be very pure."

"What's new in town?"

"Nothing much. People are pulling themselves together, not knowing what to believe. The day before yesterday the Varga family arrived. I've been to see them. They are still bewildered, disconcerted. They have great losses, poor souls."

"Don't you worry, they've still got enough left..." burst out Suslănescu.

"Well, yes, of course they have..."

They were silent. There was an estrangement between them, and they both felt it. Suslănescu suggested they should call on the headmaster of the high-school and Potra agreed. They did not talk on the way. At Lucaci's there was a large gathering: Drăgan, Burtea, Blaga and Nicuşor Spinanţiu who had grown a black, pointed beard, and was walking about in the middle of the drawing-room, speechifying.

The entrance of the two passed almost unnoticed. The headmaster shook hands with them, asked Suslănescu how he was and told him that his friend, Corian, had volunteered and been sent to the front.

"I am positive about it," said Spinanţiu in a flutter. "We won't be allowed to take possession of Transylvania. The pretext is we are not democratic enough. We do not offer sufficient guarantees of democracy, we who have fought against the Nazis, we who have been persecuted by the *Gestapo*. I call that going too far."

"*C'est le droit du plus fort, vous savez,*" Drăgan said rapidly, lifting his finger. "*Du plus fort,*" he stressed as if he were giving a lesson.

"It's not even certain," said Blaga stroking his brown moustache.

"Oh yes, it is. Baron Papp went to Bucharest this morning to get a corroboration of the fact. Should it be true, we, the intellectuals at the western frontier, are in duty bound to raise a vehement protest, to make ourselves heard where necessary."

'Protests again ? Action again ? Fights again? Agitation again ? Against whom ? Why ? What for ? Instead of being thankful that we're alive,' thought Suslănescu astounded. He was sorry he had come, and looked in amazement at his colleagues, people he knew, but he no longer recognized.

"I'm surprised at that, seeing that we too are now fighting against Germany," said Potra, his eyes sparkling. "Should it be true, we mustn't give in, but fight to our last drop of blood."

Suslănescu felt like shouting. 'But these people are unconscious!'

"In any case, gentlemen, I entreat you, the utmost discretion until the baron returns. We have a democratic government. General Sănătescu is trusted by the Allies; in the capital there are plenty of foreign correspondents."

"We need no foreigners to settle our vital problems," said Potra heatedly. "We'll do it by ourselves."

"General Mîndru would kiss you for saying so," said Spinanţiu with a laugh. "How do you like my beard, gentlemen ? I swore I wouldn't shave it off before we entered Cluj and demolished Matei Corvin's statue!"

"Why should we demolish it? He was a Rumanian, wasn't he?" put in Blaga.

Suslănescu got up.

"Yes, gentlemen," Spinanţiu was saying, feeling he was the centre of unanimous attention. "The Hungarians have not calmed down, and this fact, it is true, will most likely encourage them to be arrogant. No later than yesterday I saw a group of Hungarian girls wearing national costumes, in the street. A group of young men gave them a very good lesson. I was sorry that my position forbade my interfering... On the other hand you, gentleman, do not read the communist paper "The Patriot." Under a very polite and 'patriotic' tone a certain Radu Stîncă, alias Robber, threatens us , foaming with rage. He dares criticize the government in a veiled but precise manner."

"Why, gentlemen, are there no more concentration camps?"

"You well know there aren't," said the headmaster shaking his head. "Better tell me where I could get some potatoes, for we've nothing to eat. Or flour, or anything else."

In a moment the discussion turned to the subject of food. Suslănescu took advantage of the opportunity and left after having asked Burtea what he knew about the beginning of the school term or about the payment of the salaries.

"Nothing... at the high school there's a military hospital, everything's topsy-turvy. The salaries — God only knows. What? Are you dying to begin work again? By the way, lest I should forget, Răducanu is back. He's a great communist. We shall have trouble. Indeed we shall."

Fear seized Suslănescu.

*

Since the Soviet troops had entered the town, Vîslan had hidden in a deserted vineyard together with Horia Baniciu. During the night they took turns to keep watch, handing one another the automatic pistol and the grenades, starting at the slightest noise; but had anyone come upon them of a sudden, they would not have dared to shoot.

The third day after their arrival they were joined by Borţan, a sergeant major and a deserter who astounded them with a store of terrific news. Fortunately, the sergeant major had a huge sack full of tinned meat which they ate without bread, upsetting their stomachs. Baniciu slept all the day long in a bed without a mattress, covering himself with their cloaks. He pretended to be ill and had forbidden them to make the slightest noise. Vîslan would have liked to talk to him; he felt that if he went on keeping silent and turning his fear over in his mind, he would soon go mad. When he started saying to himself: 'If I had left in the morning or if I had not gone to the station,' he felt like roaring aloud. Several times he thought of killing Baniciu while he was asleep. He felt a deadly hatred for his broad white face, his tow-like hair, as long as a girl's, and the cold light in his eyes which looked like fish scales. Then he told himself that Baniciu was certainly expecting something. It had been the same in the 1941 rebellion: when the soldiers arrested him, he was taken to the police station where the military attaché von Eck had come to fetch him, had put him into an airplane after having dressed him in a German pilot's uniform, and packed him off to Berlin, from where he returned with a unit of S.S. men, late members of the Iron Guard. This was all he knew about him. He had not been able to find out anything more. Neither did he know anything about a lot of ex-comrades of his who had disappeared, nor about their plans, or, well, at least something that could justify Baniciu's calm. He finally tried to explain to himself that *ex-Sturmbandführer* Banicz was a perfect dunce, a pathological case, a mentally deficient sadist.

When the Germans had occupied the town on September 14th, Baniciu had compelled him to issue a newspaper bearing the green title "The Guard, the Captain." It was rather a manifesto than a newspaper. It consisted of only one page with an editorial, the German *communiqué* and anti-semitic and anti-communist slogans. Vîslan wrote it by himself at the German headquarters, taking great pains and sweating profusely over it, but no one commented either his lame sentences or his grammar mistakes, or his incoherence. At six o'clock, Baniciu would

come to take it. He read it quickly, scattering some "Death to the Jews! Final Victory is Near!" here and there, and gave it to Holban, a member of the Iron Guard, who took it to the German military printing-press. Baniciu would never address him; he didn't threaten him, shout at him, nor remind him of his activity. He seemed to have forgotten his very name; he regarded him merely as a machine to produce the newspaper. Vîslan had not the slightest idea how they sold it, and to whom they sold it. He would have liked to drink, to carouse and, one day, he could bear it no longer and said so to Baniciu. The latter eyed him in surprise, then said:

"Today you're to come with me, *verstehst?*" He used to strew his phrases with mispronounced German words.

"Where to?"

Baniciu looked at him as if he were an oddity.

"The car's outside. *Schneller, schneller'!*"

Vîslan followed him through the corridors of the former Catholic girls' high school "Notre Dame de Sion," now turned into military headquarters. At the white doors of the classrooms, there stood motionless, their legs wide apart, very young soldiers wearing camouflage smocks, their top-boots filled with grenades. Vîslan climbed into an open Mercedes Benz car, and quickly pulled his hat over his eyes. He was afraid that Baniciu would say scornfully: "What's the matter, comrade, are you afraid someone will recognize you?" But the other was silent, lolling on the leather cushions of the car and beating the leg of his boots with his yellow gloves. Vîslan had not been in town at all and therefore, after a while, began to look about stealthily, curiously. The houses seemed empty, deserted; at some balconies there hung German and Hungarian flags. No passer-by was to be seen. The car, followed by a lorry full of soldiers, drove on hurriedly; it left the town and was now in the wide plain. It was cold and it looked like rain. The rooks were cawing in all the trees.

"Can you take snapshots?" Baniciu had asked.

"Yes."

"Here you are," and he handed him a camera in a fine leather case. "You're going to take photographs!"

"Of what?"

The car cut straight across the field, went round a copse of dried hazelnut-trees and stopped. Vîslan saw some hundreds of men, women, children, lined up in the field and watched by several platoons of German machinegunners. The car stopped, putting on the brake. him, saluted Suddenly Baniciu jumped down. A *Feldwebel* came up to in the Hitlerite fashion and reported something.

"Come on, get out quicker!" said Baniciu harshly. "Find a good place, as suits you best." Vîslan looked at the people lined up on a distance of some hundred metres, then with a start he began te recognize them one by one: lawyer Bartmann, doctor Mannstein, dentist Rainay and others which he did not know, people with drawn faces, dressed in shabby clothes covered with sand and lime. Among them, a tall, lanky figure was gesticulating. ('My God, it's Robber!') He was roaring, beating his chest with his fists. His dry, bristly hair was standing up on top of his head. A German soldier of about fifteen tried to make him be quiet by putting his rifle across his chest. Robber was weeping, spitting and continually roaring in German. 'They're going to shoot them,' Vîslan thought terror stricken. 'They're taken them from their houses and they're going to execute them.' Behind them he saw a long trench, freshly dug.

Baniciu crossed the field, followed by the *Feldwebel*, came up near the line of people and motioned to Robber. The latter pushed aside the young soldier who was stopping his way, rushed to Baniciu and buttonholed him, explaining something with broad, wild gestures. Even from where he was standing, Vîslan could see all the skin on his face contracting. Baniciu struck him with his gloves over the hand, then spoke a few words to a soldier. The latter took Robber away and led him behind the hazelnut copse. The rumble of a departing motor-bike was heard. Dying to know, Vîslan ran up to Baniciu and asked him:

"Listen, Comrade Baniciu, what is the matter with him? What's happened?"

"Find yourself a good place; we're beginning," said Baniciu impatiently.

A loud roar broke from the lines of people, immediately covered by the clattering of a machine-gun, then of another, from the flank. Vîslan mechanically pressed the button without changing the negatives.

Like as many dolls, the people fell into the pit. A group of soldiers carrying spades came at a quick march; a sergeant shouted something to them and they started throwing the earth into the pit.

"Let's go home," said Baniciu who was eating a piece of bread and butter. He took another bite, then offered the rest to Vîslan. "Here, take it, I don't want any more."

That evening Vîslan attended a terrific party at the "Palace" restaurant. There were only officers present, most of them very young subalterns whose eyes had strange gleams of insanity. They ate like hogs tremendous quantities of food; they drank immoderately and then they started playing at blind man's buff. One of them had his eyes bound and was running after the others. Someone tripped him and he fell, struck his forehead against the corner of the table and broke his head. Another took his place. At about one o'clock the floor was completely covered with vomits and bodies. A very handsome young fair-haired officer had stripped himself naked. He had hung round his neck his order of Knight of the Iron Cross and was writhing in a navel-dance. Baniciu had spread out a map of the town on the table, and Fritsch the chemist was marking the Jews' houses for him. Towards morning they started shooting, but not at the bulbs, just at random, haphazardly.

The next day Vîslan printed a resumé of Horia Sima's speech which read that the part of Transylvania given up to the Hungarians should remain theirs by right. A week after, some partisan units occupied the airport, set fire to the German airplanes and captured some Stukas which were taken over by Rumanian pilots.

The Hungarian troops paraded through the centre of the town; a great mass was held at the Catholic cathedral, a colonel made a speech which was, however, interrupted by the Soviet aviation appearing and bombing the square, the bank of the Mureș and the citadel. The next morning

the Soviet guns could be heard and the retreat began in dreadful confusion. Vîslan kept close to some German officer or other, trying to make himself understood, but no one had time to heed him. Baniciu took him in a car loaded with all sorts of things: jewellery caskets, silver chandeliers, plate, knicknacks, carpets, and they started together in a long line of cars.

Suddenly, near Curtici, from the side of the highroad, from the trees, from the deserted houses, shots began to crack and hand-grenades to explode. How and where he had run, Vîslan could not remember. He had clung to Baniciu who was taking his uniform off without stopping on the way, hastily throwing away his helmet, his tunic. They were stepping over corpses lying outstretched in the middle of the road, among burning cars, over knives, forks, heavy-gilt frames, liqueur bottles, in a pandemonium of shots, whistles and shrieks.

"They aren't Russians," an Iron Guard man was gesticulating. "They're communists, partisans." He stopped abruptly and fell in a ditch, writhing with pain.

They had walked about all the night long, passing through yards, dark lanes, orchards. The Soviet guns kept roaring; towards the East the whole sky was ablaze, while from the town waves of flames rose up to the sky. Towards morning they had arrived at Pîncota and had discovered the vineyard. Baniciu said curtly: "Here we stop. If there's anybody about, we shoot him." The house was deserted, there were no windows, no doors; only a bed, turned upside down, in a corner Baniciu immediately lay down on it, then, sniffing, he said:

"Listen, there's a corpse somewhere. Go and see. There's an awful stink."

Behind the house, on a heap of rubbish, lay a Hungarian soldier, his head split. Vîslan took a plank from the fence and, stopping his nose, covered the corpse with rubbish, then entered the house and lay down on the floor The sweat had frozen on his back.

Since then three weeks had elapsed.

Almost frantic with boredom, Vîslan was trying to draw clumsily on the wall a map of Europe in innumerable

variants: one resembled a whale, another his former Calabrian hat, but in all of them the distance between Rumania and Switzerland or Sweden was rather long.

One day Borţan said:

"Well, Mr. Mihalache — that was the name Vîslan had given — I must be off. I'll get on a train and travel till I get home. By God! If I see my street again, then everything'll be alright. I say good-bye and *bonjour* to you. Bye-bye!"

When the sergeant-major had gone, Vîslan felt lonely and God forsaken. When evening came on and a monotonous drizzle began, Baniciu crept out from under his coat, tossed back his long hair and said:

"Now you go too..."

"Where to?"

"Home. And mind your own business."

"And what about you?"

"I'm going too... Why... you don't think I'm to rot here, do you? I shall gradually gather my boys together. They too must be coming to the surface. We shall meet again."

"God grant it!" answered Vîslan none too enthusiastically.

"Got any money?"

"Of course I have," was Vîslan's hasty reply. He did not want to owe him anything.

"Give me some... *Danke*... Here, take this pistol. Off with you." And when Vîslan was at the door: "I needn't tell you that if you babble...."

"That you need," shouted Vîslan flying into a passion. "As if I knew no better than tell the whole town where I've been and what I've done," Appalled at his own daring, he ran away from the vineyard as fast as he could.

On his way to town, he was called several times; somebody fired two shots at him but he did not stop. 'As a matter of fact, I'm returning from the retreat, that's it,' he said to himself. 'All that happened seems a dream. Who knows? Maybe it wasn't true at all, maybe I've been dreaming only... I shall find a job somewhere. Something modest, humble...'

He felt with his dirty fingers the lining of his wet coat where he kept the negatives. 'Those are worth a thousand

times their weight in gold,' he thought. 'Both Varga and Motzeanu will be delighted to find me a job or give me the money to publish a weekly literary magazine.' This idea seemed so grand that he was afraid it would turn out to be impracticable. He knew nothing about what was happening in the town, yet he supposed everything had taken its usual course: politics, parties, differences — therefore opportunities to earn a living. The worst of it was that he had not got a copper and did not want to waste his highest trumps on petty thefts. When he arrived home, he climbed hurriedly the stairs and opened the door. The flat was untidy as he had left it in the morning of his flight. He quickly rummaged in a small sideboard of lacquered walnut and took out a bottle of liqueur of which he drank half and felt exhilarated. He washed and dressed. Just then the telephone rang. Vîslan started. Then he realized that he had come back to civilisation. He took up the receiver, feeling a real pleasure to answer:

"It's Ion Vîslan speaking."

"Thank God! I've found you at last, my dear fellow," rang the hoarse, elderly voice of Baron Papp. "I've been ransacking the town to find you. Nobody knows where you are, what you are doing, and I'm looking for you."

"Baron..." exclaimed Vîslan, flattered.

"Aren't you afraid to come to my house?"

"Afraid? Why? Is anything wrong?"

"Why, no, only the streets are dangerous at this hour..."

"Ah, I see."

"Never mind. I'll send you my car right away. We've got to have a talk."

Highly gratified, Vîslan lounged in an arm-chair, then drank the rest of the liqueur. How wonderfully things were turning out! Surely the baron wanted to make amends for his mistake in September. He heard the car hooting, took his overcoat and went downstairs, noticing the elegant blue Chrysler car. 'Just look at that! Democracy has already started working,' he thought, answering the driver's greeting absent-mindedly.

In two minutes they had arrived at Papp's house. The butler opened the door for him, took his hat, gloves and coat, then led him on through a line of dark rooms. There

was a fire in every room. In his study, Papp, flushed in the face, came up to him and shook both his hands — a sign of special esteem. A stranger with gold-rimmed spectacles and a divine tie, like an impressionistic painting, was lounging by the fire, smoking a cigarette which smelt of honey and figs.

"This is Mr. James F. Warte, the correspondent of the "Christian Science Monitor, U.S.A.," Papp said introducing him. "A colleague... Have a seat, dear brother Vîslan. What will you have: plum-brandy, whisky and soda ?"

"Whisky," answered Vîslan thrilled. "Whisky." He sipped it devoutly, but could not help thinking that old plum-brandy was still better. This smelt of bugs! The American examined him closely, then, probably satisfied, came up to him, patted him on the shoulder and said in very good Rumanian:

"I'm very glad to meet you..."

"Mr. Warte — explained Papp — has been here in the Balkans for a long time." He looked at his gold watch, coughed and began straightaway: "My dear friend, we've been looking for you everywhere because we need your lights. It is rather late, I'm an old man and therefore we'll put off to another time talking about all we have been through — for instance till Sunday when I hope you'll do me the favour of coming to dinner. The Reverend Vasalie is coming too... I hope you'll join us..."

"Baron..." exclaimed Vîslan overwhelmed.

"Here's what it is all about," began Papp. Our party is starting its activity again. Hard fights are ahead of us. But we shan't give in..."

"No, certainly not," said Vîslan with conviction.

"We intend to issue a paper of real democracy, of real culture, of real patriotism."

"At a high technical level," put in Warte.

"We're looking for a man with great experience, with knowledge. Our young men have the gift of the gab, but they're not reliable, while it is within your competence to do the job. You shall not want funds, you shan't be as... er... before. We'll give you a free hand. I know you're clever and can manage things. That's what I like about you. (Vîslan blushed.) We shall have to oppose

the enemies of the nation with all our means, do you understand ?"

"Of course I do."

"This is going to be a serious paper. We'll help you to get up a team of well-read young men, all graduates, and a distributing staff well, like in the West... Now I must turn in, while you two settle the technical side of the business. I've ordered the butler to have a room and dinner ready for you."

He shook hands with them and was off. Warte took out his note-book, drew a chair up to the table and sketched a newspaper sheet. Vîslan simply could not believe his eyes.

*

A thirst for life, for happiness and love had taken possession of Lucian Varga. He had seen the war from the distance, visualizing its horror only from hearsay, until one day his father had appeared at Moneasa in an indescribable state, ragged and ill. All the household had got excited, had looked after him, had fussed over him. Dressed in a silk dressing-gown, Varga had spent whole hours in a deck-chair, posing as a martyr. He had never told them the troubles he had been through; he only made a priest-like gesture as if his adventures had conferred him superior wisdom. During those days, Lucian realized that his father was no better than a mummer, and this discovery made him treat him kindly, protectingly and delicately; at the same time it drew him nearer to his mother in whom he discovered undreamt-of treasures of stoicism and unselfishness. The fever of those days had brought them all nearer to one another, welding their family unity. Even Larisse was no longer looked upon as an intruder, and Mrs. Varga was kind, almost maternal to her. Lucian, who had read a lot about the life of women, thought that his mother was entering a new phase of her life and was proud of the resignation and simplicity she was showing by renouncing her womanly rights. Her attitude towards her husband was largely maternal while, to Lucian she talked as if he were a friend. Some of their talks were disturbing. One evening his mother reproached him his awkwardness towards women.

"No, darling, you mustn't be like me. Sexual problems have always been quite immaterial to me. I accepted your father's attentions because I had to become a mother, that's all. But on you, as a man, this indifference could have an evil influence. Teddy is much cleverer in this respect, he takes things simpler. He will be happy... Court Larisse, have a good time."

Lucian, red in the face, was playing with the table-cloth fringes. Yet his mother's advice haunted him, the more so as the French woman had always attracted him. He was just on the point of falling in love with her, of idealizing her as much as he had hated her before, when the Belega family arrived at the Vargas' house in a big military lorry full of all sorts of things. The general, giving himself airs of importance, delivered them a very scholarly lecture on how the war was progressing, making all sorts of forecasts. He would draw maps on the table-cloth with a burnt match, he would hem in flanks and manoeuvre armoured divisions. Varga would try and turn the discussion on politics. He had begun to recover, to grow fatter, and to be more and more interested in the future. But the general was only interested in the military side of the problems. He was talking about a certain "Churchill plan" for the invasion of the Balkans in order to check the Russian influence; he was reckoning the number of the Rumanian troops and drinking innumerable glasses of wine.

From the very first evening, Lucian was overwhelmed by Gipsy Belega. The girl had an exotic, American beauty: she resembled Scarlet O'Hara and was as carefree and as innocently and unconsciously sensual. The glass of wine he had drunk had gone to his head. He drew his chair near hers and embarked upon a discussion about the future, intoxicated by her warm, gipsy-like perfume. The following days he continually went about with Gipsy: they climbed hills, they admired the mellow loveliness of the sun — "like the weary profile of a southern beauty," as Lucian had put it. She unbuttoned her blouse down to the waist, and Lucian, thrilled, could see her small breasts throbbing. He always tried to walk behind her so as to admire her smooth, slender, golden legs. It seemed to him that the whole nature with its riot of auburn and

of sunshine was sharing the fever that had seized him. They would sit down on bald heights, looking at the undulating fir forest. She would clasp her knees with her arms, and the blue dress would cling to her slender lissom body. Once Gipsy told him with glowing eyes:

"Do you know that your friend Andrei is a hero? Micky saw him at Ineu pushing a field-gun or something like that. He says he was dreadful to look at: hairy, dirty, black like the devil, yet dogged. He couldn't talk to him because he only saw him while driving past in a car. Andrei is... very mysterious."

"Do you care for him?" Lucian asked stupidly.

"I don't know," she answered. "He intrigues me." Lucian realized, that if the discussion slid on that direction, he would become a confidant, *l'ami de la famille.*

"There are two kinds of people," he said. "Those who make a show of their adventures and whom people call heroes, impressed by their visible deeds, and the others — the few — who live completely inwardly... But these storms are not seen and not told."

"Tell me some·poetry," Gipsy asked him. "All the girls say you're such a highbrow!"

Lucian blushed and anwered as he had once answered Father Potra:

"I'm not a highbrow, Gipsy..."

"Then what are you?"

"I haven't the slightest idea..."

Then the rains began and one day the waggons with refugees appeared, filling the health resort. General Belega was continually preparing to go away nobody knew where, to collect information, but in the meantime the Soviet troops arrived. From the windows of the villa they all looked upon the uninterrupted stream of tanks, lorries and soldiers. Then, one evening, a major and several officers were billeted at their house. They gave them the best they had, and Belega discussed the situation at the front. It seemed to Lucian that the Russians were looking down with manly contempt on that general without any army, who was fussing about, pouring wine into their glasses and asking them to help themselves. When they had gone to bed, Belega came to each of them saying spitefully that

the Russians were greenhorns as regards tactics, and that they had won only thanks to their numerical superiority. The next day great preparations were made for their departure, and Belega offered to find them a car. The day when all the house rang with the noise of cases being dragged about, soldiers cursing and the general's majestic orders, Lucian kissed Gipsy. She clung to him, hugging his body to her breast. Lucian was murmuring wildly:

"So you love me, Gipsy?"... Then, seated side by side on the sofa, he talked to her about other countries, about rustling palm-trees, about fleeing and forgetting. He felt happy, proud, a man. He invented for her on the spot a lot of short romantic stories inspired from the Horatian saying *Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero* and, while squeezing her slender, impatient hot fingers, he thought that this was more than if she had actually belonged to him. Indeed the girl was eyeing him with amazement, as if discovering in his words new horizons, new and undreamt-of landscapes. During the journey home, she pressed herself against him, letting him feel the slightly curved line of her thighs, or smell the exhilarating perfume of her curly hair, and whispered warmly into his ear:

"Lucy, I'm so fond of you..."

The first days after their return a lot of acquaintances called to tell them about what had happened during their absence. Teddy had begun to attend the YMCA club which was newly opened. There you could listen to new records, dance, drink, play table-tennis and meet nice girls. Lucian was expecting a sign from Gipsy and he started every time the telephone rang, but it was either Motzeanu or Baron Papp or Spinanțiu... By discreetly questioning Teddy, he learned that Gipsy was a constant visitor of the YMCA club where she behaved like a loose young woman, carrying on with an engineer, formerly an Intelligence Service agent and, it was said, a wonderful chap rolling in money. Then Lucian remembered Andrei and went to see if he had come back. The house was locked up, no one knew anything about him. Andrei might very well have died. Reality seemed so stuffed with unlikelyhood, with something theatrical and forced, that the most

paradoxical thoughts seemed natural and moderate compared to it, so that it was indeed possible that Andrei had been buried somewhere in a ravaged autumnal field. In that crazy town hope seemed a tailless bird. Some people, many in fact, shunned their feeling of inward void by getting drunk and by singing. Gipsy had forgotten the intellectual thrill she had maybe experienced by his side, and he was the same shy fool as usual, yet, instead of being sad about it this conclusion filled him with strange contentment. In order to keep up his state of irrationality, and absurdity — for it would disperse towards evening, leaving in its stead a kind of blind, groundless fear — he once got drunk on some plum brandy from the larder. But as the wakening was too painful and disgusting, he gave up such palliatives.

He came across his copy book with the poems so despised by Father Potra, and he was amazed at the restlessness they breathed. It was as if someone had set a mirror up to his face. He wrote:

Friendship
To the Hypothetic Andrei

We seem to be of every thought bereft...
Maybe we're others, or maybe we've left ;
Too bored with life, this town has hanged itself.
How thin the row of books seems on my shelf.
Our laughter bursts, fermenting, at our side,
As if, astonished, it were covered tight.

My hand that's knocked like mad at every door
Seems to have rotted like a wooden floor ;
Of treacher'ous ticks an avid, mighty flood
Have sucked their fill of my reluctant blood.
Chase them away : I daren't myself do so
E'en to escape this agonizing throe.

When on all fours, the world's nearer to you,
Your fellow-men under your lids will fight.
Let's swing the thurible with all our might
Out of sheer shame, there's nothing else to do,

And like two priests along a ruined street,
The barricades with death-masses let's greet.

He chose for the whole copy-book a motto from Hölderlin:

Ich verstand die Stille des Aethers;
Die menschlichen Wörter verstand ich nicht.

This was all he was interested in.

His father, however remained locked up in his study for several days, making all sorts of plans, trying to make the rumours and his personal information and conclusions agree, so that, when he would make his entrance on the arena of the town, he would be able to adopt rightaway a consistent attitude.

Some of the friends of the family (teachers, doctors, engineers) were very optimistic. They did not think of anything at all, they met every evening at very merry games of bridge or rummy, they drank and planned jolly excursions in Western Europe. Others saw everything in dark colours: they foretold violent and sudden reverses and disasters — had the Germans not begun to collapse precisely when they were more powerful, they argued — and they kept aloof, storing food and warm clothing and exaggerating the incidents that had happened during the retreat. Varga didn't accept any of these suggestions. From the perusal of the Bucharest newspapers he gathered that something was being prepared there and that great changes would soon take place. For him the fact that the Communist Party had got organized militarily, had fought the Germans at the railway station and had harrassed and destroyed them at Curtici, was most significant; from now on they would surely claim rights or, in case of a refusal, they would impose them by force. He was very eager to know what Baron Papp's attitude was, but he kept postponing his visit, paralysed by fear. He had answered the repeated appeals of the aged politician saying once, twice, three times that he was seriously ill, that he was afraid it was typhoid fever. He had done this

almost instinctively, without thinking, yet he had to draw the conclusion of his attitude: he was frightened out of his wits. The energy inherited from his mother, which had sustained him so far, had suddenly left him. Even the burden of the household, the cares of the catering seemed too much, in perspective. For the moment, thank God, they had nothing to complain of. He finally got a letter from his brother Crișan, delivered by a fishy-looking person, who seemed to be in disguise, in which the former wrote him that he would come home because, as a former big shot in the government office in Transnistria, he feared he would be arrested at any moment, and deferred to the Court as war criminal. He begged him to do his utmost and get in touch with a good physician to get him into a sanatorium for nerve diseases. The man who had brought this disturbing message asked him very airily for some food, and said he was Lieutenant Dumitreanu, ex-assistant commander of the Golta camp, and respectfully drew Varga's attention to the *post scriptum*: "Be so kind and get Lt. Dumitreanu a job. The lad is in danger of losing his head. If you have solved the problems of our rice plantations at Cefa, send him there."

"Does this *post scriptum* meet with your approval?" asked the lieutenant not without a certain amount of sarcasm.

"Quite, quite," answered Varga hurriedly. "Only, you see... I haven't yet solved the problem of the rice plantation. You understand... it was in the ceded territory, we made an arrangement with a Hungarian peasant, Kardos."

"The best thing would be for you to give me a power of attorney," said Dumitreanu. "I studied for one year at the Law Faculty in Bucharest, and I hope I haven't forgotten those things yet. And, besides, I've been through the war," and he patted the hip-pocket of his trousers.

That night Varga could not close an eye. He did not move so as not to wake his wife, but he sighed from time to time, unable to control himself. After a time she said — caressing his forehead in the dark, with her dry hand:

"Salvator, why won't you let me share your troubles?"

"But mummy, there are no troubles to share," he stammered.

"You, see, Salvator, I feel we'll have to struggle hard for our children, for their future. You're a splendid man, full of initiative, and I can hardly recognize you now, in your present state of listlessness. Now, when our relations... isn't it so... when life has brought you on a new track, I am willing to set you perfectly free, but I want to help you. We must carry our cross together."

Varga could no longer control himself. He laid his head on her chest with breasts as flabby as wet rags, and started weeping, choking with tears.

"Hush... hush... Salvator... now then, pull yourself together ..." She pushed him aside gently and went and brought him a glass of water from the bathroom. Then she switched on the night-lamp, slipped on a dressing-gown and sat down stiffly on the edge of the bed.

"You've got to renew your connection with Mr. Papp and start being active. I want the boys sent to Paris next year, to the Sorbonne."

"Of course... of course..."

"Will you promise, Bunny?" The old pet name of bygone days had come back to her lips, making Varga start as if a lizard had touched him.

"I promise, I promise... Let's get some sleep." He was sorry to have let her see how weak he was. He had never trusted her: it was an absurd, unaccountable, mean and inhuman feeling, still he could not fight against it.

Although he took a sleeping-pill, he was unable to fall asleep. Crişan, a war criminal! That fellow Dumitreanu in the house.

The next day he went almost mad with rage when he saw how impudently the officer was trying to make love to Larisse. He was casting sheep's eyes at her, feeling for her foot under the table, trying to take her hand. After lunch he drew Varga aside and, taking him familiarly by the arm, asked:

"Who's the ducky? Hope she's no saint? What ripping legs she's got!"

"I'll get you papers this very day," said Varga cutting him short. He put on a black suit, a bowler hat and, as

it was raining, galoshes. He also took an umbrella and set out to call at last on Baron Papp of Zerind. When he passed through the big square he saw Soviet troops assembled there in front of a stand, and also workers. Yes, workers armed to the teeth. Foreman Mihai Jurca, Horváth and other well-known faces... The workers were carrying a big placard with "Long Live the 27th Anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution!"

This was a shock to Varga and he promptly avoided the square. No doubt that his very smart appearance would have attracted the crowd's attention. The baron received him with open arms, kissed him on the brow, telling him he had been waiting for him as he needed his lights to safeguard true democracy, true freedom and true Rumanian feelings. In the large drawing-room there were about a dozen unknown persons. Vîslan was seated at the top of the table, writing something in a ledger. A young man was handing him some invoices and calling him respectfully "sir."

"We're getting ready for the fight... This is our artillery... The paper!" said Papp lifting his finger. "I trust you know everything."

"I know nothing at all," replied Varga holding his forehead with his hands. "I'm ruined."

"But what's happened? Is any one ill? The dear lady, any of the darling children? Bring the dear young men along to me; we'll initiate them, guide their first steps."

Varga told him about his brother Crișan's tragedy and about Lieutenant Dumitreanu. He was dumbfounded when Papp burst out into such roars of laughter that the tears came to his eyes.

"Why, but you don't seem to know what's going on, my dear fellow! D'you think we're still in the times of the dictatorship? Don't you understand? Brother Salvator, write to brother Crișan to come. I'm longing to see him. The district needs him. Let him come here, and not go to a lunatic asylum, *mein Gott!* And we'll have him elected member of Parliament or senator. As for your lieutenant, send him along to me. I need a secretary, someone quick-handed... Eh, eh... brother Varga, when you hear Gyula Maniu's directions, you'll be amazed, I assure you. The

man's a genius, he has politics at his finger ends, that he has. Anyway, this can't go on. Come tomorrow to the executive committee meeting. Pull yourself together, man, great things are in store for us!"

Varga drank in his words. This old man was something of a symbol, he seemed to be the living allegory of the power, wisdom and experience of the National-Peasant Party.

*

And the town was having the time of its life...

In the centre a tavern had been opened, which one reached through a dirty vaulted passage. The inside had been made to resemble a ship. In the middle a mast, with its sails furled, from which ran ropes with small pennons and lanterns. The windows were round and life-belts hung on the walls. At the far end, on the conning-bridge, were the *cabinets particuliers*. The manager in an admiral's uniform and the waiters in white and blue striped jerseys and very wide trousers went about everywhere. The excellent band played the latest American tunes: *In the Mood*, *Chattanoga Choo-Choo*, *Symphony*, *Boogie-Woogie* and a new dance tune which was the rage: *Conga*. About midnight, Ray Sugar Johnson, a mulatto and ex-boxer, would come on and sing. He beat two teakwood sticks and sang in a sad guttural voice. Then there came a naked woman-dancer who twisted and turned in the blue rays of a flash-light, in devout silence, only to finish in an outburst of screams, and noises of broken glasses, as soon as the lights were turned on again.

All sorts of people could be seen here, most of them wearing short leather coats, Bürger top-boots and checked shirts. Their pocket-books bulged with money. Offers were made from table to table, trainfuls of salt for Hungary were formed, mysterious masonic signs were exchanged. Now and again one could hear the roars of some drunken woman whose neck was being splashed with soda from a syphon.

"Get in touch with Cincă, he'll take you there."

"No, not by Salonta. Ciumeghiu is safer... the road is better..."

"A Ford lorry? Can it carry...?"

"I've arraged with the station-master: 200,000, and it's settled. We get soldiers too, to watch it."

"Yes, if you've got dollars, it's alright... Let me kiss you. No trouble-dealing, get me..."

"Gold teeth did you say?" How many?"

"A case full. Best quality, from the Jews."

"'Pon my word man, there was a whole library. Something splendid. I filled the whole carriage, and then I stoked the engine with books. Oh, if you'd seen the pictures in them with men in their night shirts and garlands on their heads... Something French, Corneliu. Good paper, but rather old... And the Russians were at our heels... ping, ping... with their balalaikas... Lucky I had the books..."

"Yes, my dear chap. Long live..."

A group of girls came out on the "bridge," wearing embroidered peasant blouses and nothing but bathing shorts. They started singing to the roars of laughter of the audience:

I wish I saw you dead, oh, Cathy...

In the centre, the town was having the time of its life...

In the quarter of the railway station and factories all the walls were covered with inscriptions:

"Down with Hitlerite Germany! Long live the liberating Red Army! Down with fascism! Long live the Rumanian Communist Party! Everything for the front, everything for victory!"

CHAPTER XIX

It was not thus that Andrei had pictured the future to himself. He had thought that, after the appalling ordeals which they had gone through, people would change. He had expected a kind of general fraternization, an offensive of life that would sweep all prejudices and selfishness away... But misery reigned everywhere. They had hardly any food. His father would stay at the station till late at night and come home with a small sack of potatoes or maize flour. They ate in silence badly cooked maize porridge full of small pellets. Andrei knew where his father got all those things: at the station he sold the merchants his

mother's frocks. One evening, looking askance, Octavian said to him guiltily:

"Andrei, we can't go on starving... You too are grown up now."

"What do you want me to do?" Andrei asked simply.

"Listen here..." Sabin was cracking his fingers; he felt ashamed. "Many people go to Hungary with salt, cigarettes. I'll try and do so too. Uncle Gavril is lending me some money. Come along with father. Things will be easier if we are together. You need so many things, clothes, shoes... D'you know, many people have grown rich after a single trip..."

Andrei did not answer. His father thought that he agreed.

Iurcovici called often on him. He brought every time a big armful of boards collected from the fences or from the station. They made a fire in the kitchen-stove, and smoked cheap tobacco, warming their hands. Iurcovici was furious.

"It's high time we got rid of the bourgeois. Get them quit their houses, and let's take their places... Those who refuse — to the wall! Damn this life! They're still as mighty as they used to be. And if you hit any of them, the party punishes you. I don't like it, you know! I've been a red since the 1919 Hungarian revolution... Then I lost touch with them... But I tell you, I didn't think it would be like this. No mercy for the bourgeois! Destroy them!"

Through him Andrei learnt what was going on in town. All the former Iron Guard members were assembling around the National-Peasant Party. Night after night they attacked the offices of the Communist Party, broke the window panes to try and get into the building. The evening before, a man driving past in a cab had thrown a hand-grenade; fortunately, he had forgotten to pull out the percussion cap. And yet it was they who complained louder than anybody else. They had asked an American journalist to come and see the communists' "abuses." In the factory, the manager had appointed a kind of steward in the place of Captain Prodan who had fled with the Germans. A man called Sarca...

"What did you say his name was?" shouted Andrei. "Do you know what he looks like?"

"I've seen him. A tall, dark fellow with a moustache."

That day Andrei went out for the first time. The piece of information given by Iurcovici had shaken him. If it were true, if the same Sarca...the chief of that gang... He had not the right to keep silent. He would look for him, and if it really was the same man...

The pace of the people in town bewildered him. People walked hurriedly; most of them, oddly dressed as though for an expedition, were carrying sacks, bundles, field chests. At the street corner, around a peasant house, people were thronging, pressing together. Dozens of hands, crumpling bank-notes, were stretching towards a tall man on the dickey, who was laughing and shrugging his shoulders...

"I don't want money. Clothes... other things, yes..."

Along the main street covered with scraps of paper, empty tins, rags and broken bottles, a newsboy was running hurriedly, followed by a group of gentlemen. He stopped by the Catholic church, jumped briskly up the steps and began to shout shrilly from there:

"The first issue of" 'dimocratic' Transylvania"! Sensational articles! Mr. Papp's statements... Quickly, twenty lei or the goods will be sold out!"

Hasty gloved hands snatched the copies, the ink still wet; then circles were formed round the buyer. The people crowded round the happy possessors of the newspaper, looking over their shoulders. Indignant voices were raised:

"I knew that it was true, sir. I was told by my brother-in-law Moglescu, the post-office clerk..."

"That's going too far!"

"What's the matter?" Andrei asked a little man who was sniffing indignantly.

"See, the Russians won't allow us to enter Transylvania!"

Andrei was now very anxious to see Lucian, so that he ran almost all the way to his house. 'We ought to have flocked together now. All of us... We cannot, we have no right to remain alone. It is up to us to make the dreams we have cherished come true.'

He rang the bell but nobody answered. 'Could it be that he hadn't come back yet?' he thought disappointed. At last he heard a voice from the top floor:

"Who's there?"

He took a step backwards.

"Bless me, Andrei! Andrei! Wait, I'll open the gate," shouted Teddie. He heard him run through the yard, then found himself in Teddie's arms.

"It's you, it's you! Lucian will faint! Oh, damn you!" Squeezing his arm hard, Teddie jumped about with joy. "You were the only one missing. All the gang has gathered together. How we'll enjoy ourselves! And next year, straight to Paris. What a state you are in!"

When Andrei entered the drawing-room, all the boys and girls stopped dancing, rushed to him and surrounded him. For a moment he became as white as a sheet, thinking that Sonia might be there too.

"*It's a long way to Tipperary, it's a long way to go,* Micky Belega sang hopping round Andrei "I think I saw you at Ineu! You were with the soldiers..."

Andrei tried to swallow the lump he felt in his throat. Suddenly, however, he blushed and smiled a wry smile.

"You seem to be getting on pretty well..."

"Well, you'll see what follows!" shouted Văgălău. "You'll see how we'll play the fools in the democratic school. See here." He came nearer and, unbuttoning his coat, showed him a revolver hanging from his belt. "Just let Mr. Drăgan dare give me a two!"

"What about Lucian?" asked Andrei in a whisper.

"Go, go, I know you're longing for your philosophy," said Teddie smiling. "But afterwards come downstairs. I must teach you a lot of dances. Conga, Wigoomba... Go, go!" He pushed him from behind. "Lucian is upstairs..."

His heart beating, Andrei went upstairs, recognizing the so well-known atmosphere, the soft carpets, the smell of parquet wax and good tobacco. He stopped in front of Lucian's door to get back his breath. He knocked gently.

"Who's there?" said a weary voice.

He knocked again. The door opened.

The first moment, they could not utter a single word Then Lucian embraced him. He kissed both his cheeks and laid his face close to his shoulder. Then he wrenched

himself suddenly from the embrace and went to the window. He took off his spectacles and wiped them mechanically with his handkerchief. Andrei took off his coat and sat down in an arm-chair. The tall back of the arm-chair exhaled a faint smell of perfume. 'Now he'll ask me what I have been doing all this time, and I shall have to choose the proper words...' He felt the need to get up and stand near Lucian at the window and, looking at the grey roofs over which the clouds were gliding, tell him all that had occurred to him. To whom else could he open his heart, in fact?

"Andrei," whispered Lucian faintly, "I have been waiting so long for you to come. I have thought so often that in those years our friendship has been the only pure thing... And maybe it is all that has been left to us..."

He lifted to him his thin, pale, bony face. In his brown, weary eyes there flickered an uneasy expectancy. He forced a smile:

"Let's sit down... Shall I get you something? Wine, cakes? Forgive me for mentioning such trite things..."

He took his hand in his usual manner, both timidly and protectively, and gently made him sit down on the broad divan, in the corner of which Andrei was wont to sit.

"When did you arrive?" he asked shyly. Andrei guessed the hidden reproach: 'Why have you called on me so late?'

"A few days ago. But I've had so much to do. You know..."

"I know, Andrei. I looked you up and was told..."

'Oh Lord!' thought Andrei, 'how painfully our thoughts fit one another!'

At that moment an irritated voice was heard at the door:

"Lucian! Lucian! Are you there, my dear?"

Lucian stood up peevishly.

"Yes, I am."

Salvator Varga entered like a whirlwind. He was extremely smart and seemed to be a prey to a most unusual agitation. As soon as he met Andrei's eyes, his face changed and took on an expression of deep surprise.

"You? Oh!" His face fell and his shoulders bent. Then, taking both Andrei's hands into his own, he whispered solemnly: "My condolences, dear boy... What a

misfortune! All the blows of Providence seem to have fallen upon us. May this alleviate — however slightly — your suffering."

He kept a moment's silence then, turning towards Lucian, burst out:

"They've at last thrown off their mask. Imagine that finally they found an excuse! An excuse as stupid and revolting as all this absurd situation!"

"Yes... yes... yes..." murmured Lucian nervously. But his father paid no attention to him.

He turned to Andrei:

"Fancy, Andrei, we aren't allowed to take possession of Transylvania!... Now that we are again on the side of our true allies. It's an artful pressure made to force a communist government upon us."

"Yes, to be sure," said Lucian grinding his teeth. His lips were quivering.

"And now hold your breaths and listen to a *Grand Guignol* show. It seems that the Rumanians, the National-Peasant Party, have butchered with axes — yes, yes, do not be astounded, my dear boy — some Hungarian peasants..."

He stopped, preparing to enjoy the effect of his speech. But Lucian was beating the devil's tattoo on his knees. Only Andrei stared fixedly into his eyes.

"It is perfectly true," he said after a pause.

Varga was dumbfounded. On his face the desire to be polite, his pity for this orphan, struggled with his indignation. Then he stepped forward and laid his hand on Andrei's shoulder:

"My dear child, how can you believe such infamy? Oh, for God's sake..."

"It' is no infamy. I too was there on the spot."

"It's not true. How dare you say such a thing?" He blushed all over and straightened his shoulders nervously. "How can you say such a thing, Mr. Sabin?"

"I think that under the circumstances one cannot be deceived by one's own eyes," said Andrei. He felt the same boiling rage and revolt that had overwhelmed him when he was downstairs and Teddie and his party were making merry.

"It's not true!" shouted Varga menacingly. "And... excuse me, please, but I forbid you... I forbid you express to make such insinuations... You... How can you in these decisive moments trample on the feelings of national dignity and pride! Just listen to him! He was on the spot, he was!"

"I was on the spot!"

"It's not true. How dare you! It's not true!"

Andrei began to titter, sending Varga flying into a passion.

"Maybe you've gone and joined the Bolshevik Party!" he said with a grimace. "What would your poor mother have said!..."

Andrei stood up:

"I was just thinking that, having seen these things, it's my duty not to be silent."

"Even if there were any truth in what you say, your duty is to remain silent..."

Lucian was fidgeting on the divan.

"Father! Andrei!"

Andrei shrugged his shoulders:

"I can't help it!"

They stood facing one another.

"What?" stammered Varga. "Is that to say... if I understand properly..."

"I'll do my best to make the truth known. The chief of the gang is in town. His name is Sarca..."

"What?" Varga was choking. "Then... I feel obliged to tell you..."

"You need not bother..."

Andrei tried to put on his coat, but could not find the sleeves.

"So... that's what you've come to," said Varga scornfully. "With the communists..."

In the doorway Andrei turned:

"With the devil, Mr. Varga, if he's not like..."

He banged the door. He still heard Varga's shout:

"Don't move! Leave him alone! If I ever catch him coming here..."

Andrei walked along the little street leading to the bank of the Mureş; he climbed on to the dyke and stopped

to inhale the air, slightly pungent because of the cold. He felt he needed to breathe deeply, as if he had struggled long in a fetid atmosphere.

During the night there had been a hoarfrost and the grass had shrivelled up. Down, near the water, the ground was whitish, and the yellowish Mureș flowed with grim solemnity. Only at the feet of the destroyed bridge, where bits of twisted iron emerged from the water like black, hostile stumps, the churning waves burst into white bubbles. Underground currents yawned with deep funnels down to the bottom of the river, long tongues of water splashed up, licking the concrete pillars, twisting round them, turning back on their way, but the stream coming from upriver caught them up, replacing them with other billowing water. Over, in the Citadel the trees were dark and bare. The tower of the church alone shone within pale rays of a round sun, against a cold, icy sky. Near the bridge, a fisherman wrapped in his coat, his fur-cap over his ears, was casting his line as if making large gestures of benediction over the waters.

Very late Andrei was coming back, heavy at heart, when he met Schwartz. The latter, clad in a blue cotton-wadded jacket, was leaning on a crutch and looking around.

At first he did not recognize Andrei; then he wanted to rush down the dyke.

"Andrei! Hullo, Andrei!"

"Yes, it's me!" answered Andrei walking quickly up the steps. He embraced him and then stepped aside to look at him. Schwartz's face was pale and worn; every time he moved, he made a grimace of pain.

"I'm so glad to have met you," said Andrei. "I was just going to call on you."

They set out together. The cement rang under Schwartz's crutch.

"What's the matter with you, Iani?"

"I was wounded," replied the latter evasively. "And you?"

"I've got a great deal to tell you... and I don't like doing it."

"It's just the same with me. I don't like it either. Everybody is boasting about their adventures, as if it were their

own merit. It's true they've been roused from the lukewarm commonplace life in which they indulged..."

"You're just the same," laughed Andrei. "What are you doing now?"

"I'm working at the U.T.C. (Union of Communist Youth)" answered Schwartz with a certain solemnity. "And you?"

"I'm doing nothing."

Schwartz viewed him suspiciously, scrutinizingly:

"Everybody is doing something today. Nobody has the right to be idle. Or maybe..."

"Maybe what?"

"Can you possibly be like the others? 'The King and the homeland, England and America?'

"I don't get you..."

Schwartz stopped and examined him:

"You don't understand? Where have you been all this time?"

"I've only got back two days ago. It's my first outing. I intended to call on you."

"Why?"

After a pause, Andrei said, staring at him:

"Have you heard of the massacres at Varseg?"

"Of course I have. The Maniu guards. Today's National-Peasant paper has an impertinent article full of insults. They would like to be the masters of Transylvania and perpetrate further massacres under the banner of 'democracy'..."

"I was there," said Andrei quietly. "That's why I was looking for you."

Schwartz stared at him, dumbfounded. Andrei's drawn face, swarthy and wind-beaten, with two deep lines on both sides of his mouth, was so changed, so much older, that he did not doubt for one moment what he said. He grasped Andrei's arm tightly.

"You were there? You saw it all?"

"I did."

Schwartz bit his lips. When he turned to Andrei, his voice was quivering imperceptibly.

"Andrei, listen to me... couldn't you write an article on it? Would you?"

"Yes," answered Andrei simply.

"Come along..."

They climbed down the dyke in silence.

They walked along the boulevard, Andrei stalking along impatiently. They stopped in front of a modern building the walls of which were riddled by bullets. There were no panes in the ground-floor windows, and piles of wood were scattered on the pavement.

"This is the former building of the *Deutsche Buchhandlung*," said Schwartz walking ahead.

He said a few words to the man at the gate, who motioned to them to go in. They walked down a long corridor floored with cement cracked at intervals by explosions.

"The Germans tried to resist in this place, but they couldn't even keep it up for more than half an hour."

Some men greeted Schwartz. They were poorly clad and seemed to be in a hurry.

They entered a large, very bright room without any window-panes. On the floor were a few logs of wood. A small broken table had been thrown into a corner. At a rickety desk was seated a tall, young man. He wore. a leather jacket and a black jersey. Two soldiers stood in front of him. One of them, with a livid face, was casting frightened glances at the other who was egging him on-

"Speak up, Marin, what the devil! Why are you frightn ened ?"

"I'd rather..."

The young man at the desk motioned to Schwartz:

"Listen... he beats them within an inch of their life. Colonel Gheorghiu of the 14th Cavalry does..."

"Do not put down my name," begged the soldier who had been beaten.

"No fear, no fear..."

The young man stood up and shook hands with them; then he turned towards Schwartz. The latter introduced Andrei:

"Comrade Robber, en editor... Andrei Sabin, a schoolfellow of mine..."

"Freedom!" said Robber greeting him and looking him up and down. "Are you collecting forces ?" he said smiling at Schwartz. "Fine, fine. Sit down on the edge of the desk. We've got no chairs. The reaction will not

leave us anything to rest on. In our turn, in a short time — time is very relative in a revolutionary perspective — we shall put it in its proper place. Right, am I not?"

"My friend here," said Schwartz slowly, "witnessed the massacres committed by the Maniu guards."

Robber stared, clapped his hands and raised his arms to the ceiling:

"Splendid! How did you happen to run into him this very day? Extraordinary. This morning Comrade Jurca assigned me the task of combating that scoundrel Vîslan's article. I've written something, of course," he said unassumingly, "but an eyewitness... you see... A direct contact gives a thrill of authenticity."

"I've spoken to you about him before," went on Schwartz without noticing that Andrei was ill at ease. "You remember about that paper at school... He was expelled from all the schools in the country."

"Oh, yes, yes, I remember... Why, comrade, you are a most promising fellow. The ground for revolutionary ideas is paved. Had you any connection with the Party during the period of illegality?"

"No," said Andrei. He did not like Robber's volubility, his affected attempts at familiarity.

"Never mind, never mind," said Robber comforting him. "So you'll write an article for us. Just recount what you saw, that's all. The conclusion will be drawn by us... I mean... we'll see to the political interpretation..."

"In that case..." said Andrei.

"Oh, youthful impatience, how useful you are to the revolution! Here's paper and a pen, comrade. I'm off to tell comrade Jurca. Write, comrade, and don't spare the fascists. Their fate is sealed!"

He went out quickly, gesticulating.

"A very interesting fellow," said Schwartz as if he felt that Andrei did not like him. "When you get to know him better... He is extremely well read. He was of great use to us during the years of illegality. He kept me hidden while the fascists were here. I had been wounded near the station. One day he was caught in the street during a police raid. Two days later he escaped. He does not know himself how it happened. He is very good at Marxism."

"Let me write now, Iani!"

Left alone, Andrei took off his coat which he threw down on the floor. Then he walked to the broken window-pane through which a cold draught blew in from the street. The sound of shuffling footsteps and a newsboy's voice were heard.

"Mr. Papp's leader! Transylvania belongs to the Rumanians! 'Democratic Transylvania' first issue! Twenty lei a copy!"

'Yes,' said Andrei to himself, 'Transylvania...' He recalled the arguments of the Latinist school against Rösler's insolent theories; his grandmother's stories about the elections of members of Parliament, when gendarmes with cock feathers on their hats struck right and left with the butts of their rifles; Goga's poems : 'And collect all your waters and we'll move to another country.' No, people must not move to other countries, people must live on the land where they were born, to which all their sufferings and hopes are connected. And at once it all came back to him: Through the class-room window the warm spring sun peeped in. The class-room corners were cold, smelling of kerosene and mould. He had written without stopping staining his fingers with ink. He saw before his eyes the worn face of Uncle Palli who had said to him one evening, when they were both sitting on the garden bench, looking at the calm dusty home-coming of the cattle:

"What are we doing in the Caucasus ? Our poor peasants are dying in the Kalmuk steppe... The crosses rot, earth covers them, no sign of them can be found. No sign whatever. The newspapers publish their photograph riding on camels or bringing zebras along but they remain there in the groves over which the winds of the steppe are blowing. What on earth are we doing in the Caucasus ? Who will give us back the young lives lost there ?"

And his uncle had fallen at Nalcik, "killed by an A. C. bullet which had pierced his heart," so read the intimation received. What connection was there between those recollections and the article he intended to write ? There was one. Then too they spoke of the holy war, of the country of the heroic Basarab princes, as do the members of the Peasant party today, when speaking of Transylvania.

Through the broken window-pane the noises of the street were wafted in, in waves... Andrei began to write.

When he finished, he did not realize what a long time had elapsed. He looked at the sheets of paper covered with big writing, with irregular letters, then, as if he had worked hard, he wiped his sweating forehead with the back of his hand. Now only did he ask himself what his acquaintances' opinion about his article would be. Lucian? He shrugged his shoulders. He could not imagine... It would be worse with his father. He nourished a boundless respect for Maniu, 'the great Rumanian.'

When Robber entered the room, he handed him the sheets of paper without having read them over again.

Robber took the sheets, weighed them in his hand. He lit a cigarette.

"So you were there... Alright. You've made up your mind to enter our ranks, haven't you?"

"I don't know..."

"Why don't you know? This article proclaims your stand. You must wait and see the thunders of the hysterical-historical bourgeoisie."

Andrei looked at him openly:

"I had to do it, handn't I?"

"Evidently, evidently... Tell me, please: Do you know anything about Marxism? Can you find your bearings?"

"No," replied Andrei. "I'd like too..."

"I'll give you *l'ABC du Communisme* to read. A very interesting book by a somewhat obsolete author. And, of course, the Bible, the manifesto of the old teachers... The learning of dialectics is very important... Indispensable. For us intellectuals it is a weapon that replaces many things. You seem to be a very pleasant person... Ivan — that's what I call Schwartz — has told me about your bravado. Now listen: Jurca, the secretary, wishes to see you. Answer as simply as you can. We communists appreciate that. Before going away, come back and I'll give you the books. Freedom!"

Andrei went out into the crowded corridor and knocked at the next door.

"Come in!" answered a thick voice.

The room was large or it seemed to be so, as there was no furniture in it, except a table and two chairs.

A stocky, broad-shouldered man was sitting at the window, tattooing on a piece of broken pane. The creaking of the door made him turn round. He was still young, though his stiff hair had begun to grey. He looked very tired so that his smile was somewhat sad. He shook Andrei's hand vigorously and motioned to him to sit down.

"Schwartz has told me your story. Sit down..."

Andrei sat down, drawing round him the skirts of his coat.

"Do you smoke?" said Jurca handing him his wooden cigarette-case.

He put near at hand a box of matches then, leaning heavily against the back of the chair, scrutinized him at leisure.

"Yes," he said after a while. "Now listen, comrade ... I don't know whether you realize the importance of your article..."

"I only wrote what I saw..."

"Maniu's supporters have begun a very serious campaign. One of our answers to it is this article. Please, tell me the facts."

Slowly, with some difficulty, Andrei related all he knew. Jurca listened to him, nodding now and then. His countenance became dark, harsh.

"Alright," he said when Andrei finished. "Will you be responsible for each word?"

"Yes."

"Schwartz told me that you had been expelled from school. Why?"

"For a... for a mere trifle," he said in a low voice. "I wrote in an examination paper just a lot of nonsense."

"What nonsense?"

"Oh, it was not exactly nonsense," Andrei corrected himself. "I wrote that I was sick to death of all that was going on at school... among us. I don't know how to put it. It was a pretext... to let off some steam..."

"Do you intend now to go on attending school?"

"I've no idea. If they take me, maybe..."

"They will be obliged to take you. What form were you in?"

"The seventh. Do you know...?" Andrei stopped.

"Go on, comrade..."

"I heard that the head of that gang... a man called Sarca..."

"What?" said Jurca frowning.

"Sarca... seems to be in town..."

Jurca rose to his feet.

"Call on us this evening... To see your proofs. Thank you, comrade. We'll continue our talk then. What's your father's job?"

"He's a railway clerk."

"Won't there be any consequences?"

"I think so," laughed Andrei, "But it doesn't matter."

Robber was waiting for him with some booklets.

"Come in, comrade. Here's what we've found hereabout. I'll give you more from my library. What languages do you speak?"

"French and a little German."

"*Harasho*. When will you call on us?"

"This evening. Good-bye."

"Freedom!"

Andrei hastened to go home, holding the booklets tight under his arm. The way seemed rather long. This was another old feeling, the impatience that overcame him whenever he had a new book. He would lie down on the sofa, his mother would put before him a plateful of little cakes and talk in a low voice in the kitchen: 'Andrei's reading.'

Inside, the air was cold and stuffy. He quickly took off his clothes and crept under the quilt. He stared at the booklet with its red covers and worn edges. 'A book which has given another direction to the world,' he thought 'That's an extraordinary thing: to be conscious that you have been able to change something.' He opened the book. 'A ghost is roaming through Europe...'

Late in the evening, when the feeble light made the pages look grey, somebody banged at the door with his fist. Andrei got up, his head reeling and went to open it. He was so much impressed by what he had read that all about him seemed unreal. A thin swarthy man, his cap

pulled down over his forehead had stopped in the doorway. He was stamping impatiently.

"Comrade Jurca sent me to ask you to come to headquarters," he said in a pronounced Hungarian accent.

"Alright, I'm coming," replied Andrei.

He took his coat and they went out.

He walked on without noticing where he stepped.

"My name is Horváth," said the man stopping and reaching out his hand... "I'm a Hungarian." He repeated with some aggressivity: "Yes, Hungarian. You've been at Varseg, haven't you?" he did not await the reply. He groaned: "I come from that village too. My relatives live there. I have a brother who had to hide in the village. The police were after him."

"Perhaps..." whispered Andrei.

"I too have fought against the Hungarian fascists! Get me? I shot them... I killed them. No, it doesn't matter. If such is the case, it doesn't matter. The Maniu guard... Well, let me only hear anybody saying he belongs to Maniu's party... I'll smash his head like I would that of a snake, How did it happen? Tell me!..."

"I can't," replied Andrei.

Horváth looked at him angrily.

"I can't... I've written everything..."

They spoke to one another no more. In front of the party headquarters, Horváth left him in a hurry. For a moment Andrei had the feeling that all this was too much for him, that it overwhelmed him. He shuddered. 'Why, hang it all!' He entered Robber's room. Schwartz came to meet him with outstretched hands.

"Very well written, Andrei. Sober, just as it should be. Let me introduce you to comrade Holtzmann."

A man still young, but with a tired face and dark rings under his eyes that blinked behind his glasses came up to him.

"What you've done is the right thing."

"Yes, yes," shouted Robber pushing the proofs in front of him. "Except that, if I were you... I should have written more pathetically and unmasked them... a Dantean style would have been the thing. A torrent of lava to burn them."

"Facts are enough," said Andrei.

"You're a little inclined to demagogy, Robber," smiled Holtzmann.

Robber blushed; the veins on his forehead began to swell. He jumped to his feet:

"There are jokes that... How can one stir up the workers? With a Stendhalian style like that of official minutes?"

"By the simple truth," answered Holtzmann. Andrei looked at him: he liked him.

Robber bit his lips:

"We'll have to let our comrade get on with his work," he said coldly. "They're waiting at the printers."

They retired into the corner near the window and began to talk in whispers. Andrei reviewed his article: in this form, printed, it seeemed to have been written by somebody else and much better. He stood for a few minutes gazing vacantly: outside, the town was being lit up. He had done what he ought to have done.

Robber ran to the printers'.

"Let's go too," said Schwartz. "Are you busy, Andrei?"

"No."

"Come along too," said Holtzmann. "Every evening we talk over the latest news."

It was cold out of doors and it had begun to drizzle. The three of them were walking slowly, in silence. Andrei thought: 'Tomorrow I'll go to Sonia's.' A slight uneasiness seemed to have stolen over him. He wished that everything would occur simply, without questions or astonishment as if they had parted but a few days before, but that was impossible. He obscurely realized that something new had occurred in his life; he did not know yet what the morrow would bring him; he foresaw that a painful quarrel with his father would take place when the article would appear, or he may even not notice it at all.

These days, Octavian had grown old. So far, Andrei had not realized how childish the old man was. Now he had to be thoughtful, to avoid any dispute and to avoid memories. And as they both thought of the same things they felt uneasy. Uncle Gavril had sent them a cartful of food. Sabin had wept with emotion, and ordered Andrei

to go and thank him. Andrei put off his call from day to day.

"When you begin school again," said Holtzmann, "you'll have a lot to do. Have you applied to be taken back ?"

"No... And I think I wont't do it," replied Andrei after a pause.

"Why not ?"

"I loathe school." He smiled and laughed at himself. "Besides, I think I'm too old to sit on a bench."

"You're wrong," said Holtzmann. "School is an important field of activity."

"It possesses no attraction for me." He was talking with his lips pursed, not thinking of what he was saying. "All that will occur now is too interesting, too new. High school means old things learnt by heart, uninteresting trifles.'

Holtzmann listened carefully, his face turned towards him.

"I see what you mean," he said. "And I certainly do not agree with you. Schwartz has been telling me almost the same things. But this epoch is going to be constructive, practical. This romanticism will not last long. I mean a childish romanticism as yours is. We shall want much tenacity. There is a heroism of small facts that prepare the great ones. I read a very interesting Soviet book, *The Cement*. It speaks about certain hard-working people to whom the atmosphere seems unbreathable if it is not full of dust... You shall be constructors..."

"And what about yourself?" said Schwartz with a laugh.

"I too. Here we are. Thanks for having come with me."

Andrei took a long walk with Schwartz. He listened somewhat enviously to what Schwartz told him about his illegal activity: how they had printed leaflets and distributed them in the factory; how they had fought against the fascists. He had been wounded and had fallen off the lorry just as the Germans were entering the town. He had crept with difficulty into an uninhabited house and the following night reached only after great efforts Robber's house, whom he had met previously. The latter had given him shelter and hidden him in a little room whose entrance was covered

by a book-case. Robber was caught in the street during a German police raid,kept for two days in the concentration camp in the citadel, and had escaped a day before his execution.

"Why didn't you tell me all these when I first called on you ?" Andrei asked piqued.

He was ashamed that he had known nothing, and had groped about uselessly. He had not had the time to get closer with Ardeleanu: he had only suspected something. And at the time he needed realities, not hopes. Had Schwartz been sincere with him from the time they had met...

"Holtzmann's right, however," said Schwartz. "We'll have to go to school and work there. We'll have to struggle against the stupidities that used to enrage you. What's your opinion ? Why are you so silent ?"

"I don't know. I seem to have come from some misty place. I know I'm at home and yet I do not feel as satisfied as I had thought I'd be. Perhaps it is because we always expect everything to come true at once."

"There you are at it again! You must get rid of all that sort of stuff. You need another milieu... Call on us tomorrow, at the U.T.C. You'll find a manly atmosphere there, and meet true men."

"I'll come."

That evening it was the first time that he realized that in fact he was shy. It was hard for him to disclose his inner self before men he knew but little, as if he were afraid of them for who knows what mysterious reason.

*

On the ground floor of the building in which Baron Papp lived, in a very spacious room, formerly the premises of an Italian building company, was the National-Peasant Party Club. The baron had filled it with elegant and up-to-date furniture, electrical lamps in niches, smoking tables, deep dark-red morocco arm-chairs, a bookcase — empty for the present (the baron was waiting for James F. Warte to keep his promise and send him a great many booklets, magazines and prospectuses, all very interesting for young people). The walls had been hung with heavy tobacco-coloured silk; on the floor they had laid a beautiful Persian car-

pet. The baron had also brought from Bucharest a modern pick-up gramophone that changed the records with jazz music automatically; the only incovenience was that the young men and women did not dare dance here. However, they assembled daily, lounged in the arm-chairs, listening solemnly, keeping time with their feet and clacking their tongues rhythmically. All afternoon, till evening, some members of the party sat there waiting to receive callers — an idea precious to Baron Papp who was continually expecting delegates or, instead of them, devoted men to whom he could speak and give instructions.

One of the very welcome guests was foreman Filoftei. He had brought with him some workers, former members of the Iron Guard, dissatisfied with the communists' activity in the factory. At first, Papp had received them there, in the club, behaving very kindly to them. On their second and third call, they were led upstairs to his private study. It seemed to be the fittest place for conferences at which none of his intimate collaborators was admitted, except for Vîslan. The latter had become a sort of factotum, in spite of the discontent of the lawyers' in the party. Motzeanu did not mince matters and drew the baron's attention, but the latter only replied:

"Brother Motzeanu, I know too that he is not worth a dam. Hang it all, he's only a scribbler... But now he's of great use to us. It is advisable that *he* should write all the items in the sheet," he said raising his finger thickened by gout to the level of his temple.

Motzeanu immediately understood and admired him once more: it was obvious that he was unwilling to throw his best men into the battle. Motzeanu had been hard hit during the war. At the station somebody had thrown a brick at his head, just as he was preparing to get away. He lay senseless between the feet of the panic-stricken crowd. His wife pulled him out with great difficulty and took him to a hospital. In the deserted house, a German officer had taken up his abode. He must have been crazy, for he had made holes with his revolver in everything: in the furniture, pictures, walls. When he left, he carried away all the valuables, and broke and tore everything that he could not carry away with him. Now Mo-

tzeanu was impatiently looking forward to the normalization that would bring him a long-expected sinecure which would help him "recover," as he said enthusiastically.

Unlike Varga, who was always enigmatically silent, Motzeanu was vigorous, combative and energetic: he fumed against the communists and, when he passed by, the communist headquarters, he looked in bewilderment at the sickle and hammer. As a matter of fact he had never believed that Germany would lose the war, and communism seemed to him like a legend good to scare the mothers of young daughters (who were destined to be raped daily by the proletarian herds), or like an excellent seasoning for some newspaper article. Under the pretext of lighting a cigarette, or of tying his shoelaces, he would gaze at the building: the windows — broken every night by the "lads" — seemed to conceal terrific secrets behind them, and the people going in and out — there were many, very many of them — seemed to be anarchists, armed anarchists, of course, hatching all kinds of revolutions. In town there were lots of rumours concerning the patriotic guard that had resisted the Germans at the railway station. Nothing had upset Motzeanu more than doctor Borza's assertion: "They fought bravely and, after all, they alone knew what to do in those moments, while we..." Motzeanu, purple in the face, had stood up and shouted brokenly, so furious was he:

"Alright! Admire them! Admire them, doctor! They will ask you... when they come with arms and bombs to get you out of your house... if you admire them! Oh, the awful unconsciousness of the Rumanian intellectual!"

Borza had snarled at him, Motzeanu retorted and, in the end, Dr. Remus Pordea, assuming the role of mediator, interfered in his usual far-fetched style, irritating everybody:

"Obviously, taking into account the purely formal aspect of this manifestation, I beg you to agree with me and help me to find the proper way to characterize it as ostentatious, aggravated by a factor of political intentionality; then we could not help admitting that it is, however, an impressive act, since Marxist dogmatism holds that proletarians have no homeland... the homeland, the family, the school,

the church and all the other institutions being bourgeois, while anarchy recognizes nothing..."

"So you're making the apology of anarchy!" Motzeanu had roared, about to flying an ash-tray at Pordea's rosy head. "You are making the apology of bestiality, gentlemen. I should like to see you dressed, gentlemen, armed with revolvers and bombs, waiting in the ante-chamber for the proletarians to satisfy their instincts with Mrs. Pordea and Mrs. Borza, waiting, gentlemen, to get back your rights as husbands."

"Mr. Motzeanu!" the two ladies had cried, outraged.

Motzeanu was provoked beyond endurance by all communist manifestations. The "Scînteia," with its combative tone, made him foam and roar, the word "demoeracy" seemed to be now full of dynamite, the Red Army's victories hurt him as if he were a German. He eulogized the German soldier.

"Yes, gentlemen, we've been unjust. That fair young soldier who collected on the soles of his top-boots the dust of all Europe, deserved a better fate. Had it not been for that lunatic of a Hitler, that madman whom I'd like to see in a cage, his generals would have known how to win the war... But, never mind. We shall live and see great things. Moreover, the United States of America are civilized people, a great people. This great nation can't help being shocked by the Russians' territorial advantages at the front. You'll see! I won't say anything."

Yankee doodle, yankee doodle dandy..."

When he read in the press the word "fascist," he rushed to the kitchen and, putting the paper under his wife's eyes, would roar:

"There! Fascist! As soon as someone does not agree with them, he's a fascist. Do they know what the word 'fascist' means?"

And he took upon himself the task to explain this to the public opinion of the town, in an article of the first issue of "Democratic Transylvania."

"Fascist" — wrote Motzeanu (after having pointed out cautiously that it is not advisable to make too great a use of this word in political polemics) — "derives from *fascia*, namely a bundle of rods bound across with another,

in which the Roman lictors planted an axe, the symbol of their judicial power. From here derives also our new, modern word fascicle. Fascism was a certain Italian political movement in the 20th century, which had chosen as symbol the above-mentioned judicial instrument." The article ended with a witty point: "It would be funny to call the Germans 'swastikists,' and especially to use the word too much, and the Persians who had a lion on their flag, 'lionists.'

"More culture, my newly democratic gentlemen, and less blinding passion.

"*Sine ira et studio.*"

Dr. Emil P.D. Motzeanu."

Motzeanu was sure that in writing this article he had laid the sound foundations of his future political rise: his theory was that, sooner or later, a great anti-communist movement would break out all over the world. In order to combat the communists, he had bought in secret some communist booklets by Marx and Engels, and intended to study them. To his great surprise, he could make nothing at all of them: they dealt with chemistry, physics, economy, history, some philosophical problems, so intricate that they gave him a headache. In the evening he said to his wife:

"My dear, I too could write like that. White is black, and black is white: he who does not understand is a fascist, *bonjour* my people, *merci* for having elected me."

In spite of this raillery, Motzeanu's anxiety increased, especially after the publication of the article. All his acquaintances congratulated him warmly, and some of them wondered prudently if it had not been too keen, too clear. Everyone could easily understand against whom his sharp irony was aimed. Motzeanu shrugged his shoulders, but had finally convinced himself that his name had been put down in the communists' black books. He consequently took out of his study his army Steyr pistol, cleaned it and began to carry it about in his pocket, although it deformed his coat, made him uncomfortable when he sat down, and actualized his fear continually: every time he wanted to take his handkerchief or his box of matches out of his

pocket, he remembered that he was carrying a fire-arm about him, in order to prevent the attacks of the nihilist gangs.

The day when Andrei Sabin's article "The Massacres of Varseg" was published in "The Patriot," Motzeanu thought he would go mad with indignation. He read it with difficulty, bellowing at every line:

"This dirty fellow must be either a Hungarian or a Jew!" And at the end he roared: "He's both a Hungarian and a Jew!" and put down his name in his note-book.

At the party headquarters there was great hustle and fuss: everyone was commenting on this article and the editorial as well. Motzeanu found out to his great consternation that Andrei Sabin was a Rumanian! A schoolboy! The son of a Rumanian clerk!

"See how traitors are born!" he said foaming. "Our future executioners. This one will hang his parents the same as Sile Constantinescu the murderer did. He must immediately be expelled from all the schools in the country..."

"He has already been," answered the baron thoughtfully. "He has... You see, I'd quite forgotten about this boy. He's a very good friend of Lucilius Varga."

"Oh, yes," exulted Motzeanu. "Now I understand some of Salvator's strange outbursts. I quite understand..."

Papp was pacing the room calmly; he went to the table, took the glass of lemonade, put a spoonful of salt into it, then drank it slowly, making grimaces.

Everybody kept silence, deeply moved. The baron was punishing himself. It was one of his very old habits. Every time he made a mistake, he would mark it by such a Scevolian, so to say, self-punishment, a custom which he had observed since the time when he had been a pupil at the Theresianum in Vienna. About 1934, a Liberal journalist had heard by some indiscretion of this method, and the "Viitorul" (The Future) had published a vulgar caricature in which Papp was presented eating... after a speech in Parliament. At the café the artist had been thrashed savagely with walking-sticks by two younger members of the party.

"What are we to do, sir?" Vîslan asked the baron fearfully. The campaign which he foresaw was more than he could cope with. Yet he suggested: "I think that a vast

article, in several issues, in which, making use of historical examples. . .'' He was thinking of asking Suslănescu, whom he had met the day before, penniless, and low spirited like a stray dog.

''Oh, yes, this also,'' agreed Papp. ''This too. . . But. . . this young man will have to write a disowning article for us, you understand? To point out that it wasn't he who wrote the article, or that he was kidnapped and locked up without food or drink. . .''

''It's fantastic!'' shouted Pordea theatrically, but sincerely moved.

''I shall deal with this matter personally.'' Everyone nodded. ''You, brother Vîslan, begin the article. You must deny. Energetically. Say that you are full of doubts: the well-known compassion of the Rumanian people, their Christian tolerance. . . and so on. . . You ask yourself: whose interest is it to insult the Rumanians with such. . . monstrosities? And, *prudentissimus et discretissimus*, you announce that we are preparing a sensational article. . .''

''Alright,'' said Vîslan bowing.

He had begun to fear the baron. For the first time in his life he feared somebody and he could not understand him. Yesterday on entering his office he was greatly amazed: at the table Horia Baniciu was seated comfortably, talking with the baron.

The latter did not seem to recognize Vîslan. From that moment, the editor applied to the baron the biblical adage: '' 'unknown are your ways,'baron. . .''

Varga too came in waving the paper excitedly. He shouted from the door:

''When I think that I used to receive this fiend in my home, among my children, I could just go crazy!''

He sank into an arm-chair, perspiring and disappointed.

''Sir,'' he said with a groan, ''this new generation is appalling. . . Fancy what my son Lucian said today at dinner: 'Andrei is right. If he saw such a thing, he was obliged not to keep silent.' I boxed his ears for the first time in my life. . .''

He stopped short, regretting that he had been unable to control himself. What would they think of his paternal pedagogy?

"The younger generations are very odd," agreed the baron. "They've no self-restraint, they've no discernment, no respect... We'll have to start Spartan or Prussian methods of education..."

"I shall write about this," said Pordea.

"To mock at his own sacred nation," continued Motzeanu, "to dare profane our ancestors' memory! Woe, woe, anarchy is in store for us. Our children will drag us to the scaffold, and bathe in our blood. Lucky I've no children..."

"Tell Lucilius," cut in Papp, "to ask this young man to your place."

"What?" said Varga hiccupping with amazement.

"Do as I said. And I shall speak to his father. Get me their address."

"I don't know it..." stammered Varga. "I'll let you know it over the telephone."

He looked stupefied at the others, but saw nothing around him but a complete, though silent admiration.

The following day an editorial appeared: "The Fearful Storm of Revengeful Times." Suslănescu had surpassed himself. Andrei's article had incensed him. All of a sudden, the complex feeling which he felt for this boy changed into deep hatred. By his attitude, Andrei had lost his place in the ranks of honourable men, had flung away with his usual unconsciousness the only shield that could have saved him in these horrible times: the passionate consciousness of his nationality.

'To do this now, when under the shield of "democracy" all foreigners are trying to impose their domination!' Every day Velceanu told him about the purging, about the measures that would be taken against the Rumanians, and Suslănescu felt a circle tightening round him, forcing him to come out into the arena, to act.

He had not been a member of the Iron Guard. His colleagues who had adhered to the movement terrified him with their brutality or with their animal, purely physical vitality; but he remained anti-Semitic. Ever since his childhood he had been told that the 1907 risings, in which his grandfather had been killed, had been caused by Jewish tenant farmers. In their stead, the blue-blooded boyars

who stayed on to defend the old patrimony had paid with their lives.

So he wrote the article feverishly, not heeding Vîslan's wise and cautious advice: he started with the millenary barbarity of the Hungarians, the death of Gelu and Menumorut, that of Horia, Cloşca and Crişan; Avram Iancu's tragedy, the case of the Memorandum, Count Urmanczy's crimes at Beliu, in 1919, the Ip and Trăsnea massacres. 'Who would dare utter one single word against this nation who have been martyred for so long, who have lost their ancestral patience?' No, toleration would be criminal now. The whole world should know that there is a limit to Rumanian gentleness. 'No pity for these human monsters (as Bishop Otto of Freissing says) who devour raw meat (as says an unpublished chronicle kept in the archives of Assisi).' He concluded: 'No compromise. Rumania is *inter victoria mortesque.*'

He read the article to Vîslan, choking with emotion, and finally burst into tears. Vîslan was drunk and in a patriotic frame of mind. He sent the article to the printers' and the following day he was congratulated by the baron. He had signed the article, Suslănescu having granted his consent.

"You hit on the proper tone," said Papp shaking his hands. "We stand our ground firmly. This is what we must show the Hungarians. Bravo, brother Vîslan, bravo!" Gushing and fuddled, Vîslan thought that the time had come to tell the baron about the plans that had been haunting him concerning a literary supplement around which all the talents of the town would gather. The baron looked at him in surprise, raising his eyebrows.

"This is no time for that, brother Vîslan. What possesses you? We're beginning a great action: the censuring of the communists. This is not the time for poems or talents. I have an idea for tomorrow's issue: we shall suggest that Jurca, that noisy fellow, used to be in the Iron Guard, shall we? I know a lawyer of the same name who was... So, in case he kicks, we'll have an excuse..."

"Oh, yes, sir," said Vîslan, bowing. He regretted having spoken. His proposal must have lost him, no doubt, some of the baron's favour.

Suslănescu's article made quite a stir; it was carried about ostentatiously in the pockets of fashionable overcoats, folded so that its thick-typed title was visible; together with the tricoloured cockades, as large as chrysanthemums, it became a sort of badge.

The same day, in the afternoon, Motzeanu was at the club, waiting for Pordea. Outside, down in the street, noises, then voices and finally a shout were suddenly heard:

"Down with the fascists! Down with the fascists!"

The door opened noisily, and in the doorway there appeared a tall, thin man with a dark face. Long locks of hair were showing from under his cap. Behind him were other men in overalls, begrimed with oil, frowning. A hoarse, hostile voice was heard in the crowd:

"There's the fascist!"

"What do you want?" asked Motzeanu feeling his knees shaking.

He rose to his feet, his hands propped on the table. His thick moustache twitched.

"How well the fascists do themselves!" said the same man. "What a lot of beautiful things!"

"Is it here that this rag is published?" asked the swarthy worker, putting under Motzeanu's nose the paper crumpled in his fist. "Is it here that you carry on chauvinistic agitation? What?"

"Strike him, what's the use of speaking to him?"

"Do you know, you reactionary beast, that they killed my brother with an axe? Hey?"

Something gurgled in Motzeanu's throat, a sharp pain pierced his heart. Now he was facing the anarchists, the men with bombs. He put his hand slowly into his pocket, gripped tightly the crested wooded facings of his revolver, and removed its lock with his thumb.

"Out!" he roared in a cracked voice... "Out you go!"

"Just look at him!"

"He's giving an order! Well, he's a gentleman, isn't he?... Let's lick his soles and say in a chorus: 'We kiss your hand!'..."

Horváth raised his black fist, holding the paper close to Motzeanu's face:

"And now you're making a row, are you? Want to get us all killed. What?"

Crazy with fear, Motzeanu saw nothing but these drawn faces, those threatening eyes sparkling under the crumpled peaks of their caps, and the bony fist raised in front of his eyes.

"Out!" he yelled and snatched the revolver out of his pocket, lifting it high for all to see it.

"He's going to shoot!"

"Down with the fascists!"

"Out with you! You, vagabonds!" yelled Motzeanu. "Out!..."

The same moment Horváth's heavy fist struck him between the eyes. Motzeanu staggered and fired. The chandelier, hit, broke to pieces and a rain of crystal splinters fell down tinkling. The acrid smoke of the powder spread in the club-room.

"He's shot. He's shot at the workers, damn his eyes!"

"Go for him!"

"Give it him!"

Somebody lifted a heavy arm-chair and threw it with all his might at the bookcase. Motzeanu had time to fire once more. The bullet hit the wall, lightly scratching a worker's temple. A short iron bar flew, hurdled with great strength. Struck on the hand, Motzeanu dropped the pistol and fell on his knees. Somebody snatched the file of the "Dreptatea" and struck his head with it. Sprawling on the floor, Motzeanu groped for his revolver with his left hand, shouting aloud:

"Help! Help!"

Round him the enraged men tore the paper off the walls and smashed the glass top of the table with chairs. At last, Motzeanu seized his revolver and, leaning on an elbow, fired at random. A cry was heard, then blows and kicks were showered on him. A second arm-chair struck him heavily on the crown of his head. Motzeanu sprawled, his fingers contracted and a red haze spread over his eyes. He moved his legs a few times, very weakly... From under the broken arm-chair which sheltered his head, a pool of blood spread, which was immediately sucked up by the thick carpet.

"Smash everything!" shouted a short, reddish man, turning round and waving his short arms. "Smash everything!"

The broken pieces fell outside, on the pavement. In front of the building the crowd had grown larger and larger and shouts echoed. A car stopped before the club, making its brakes creak, and Gheorghe Jurca, in his shirt sleeves, rushed into the house, elbowing his way in.

"What are you doing?" he shouted from the doorway. His face was as white as a sheet. The men stopped at once. Some of them were staggering. Seeing the reddish man, Jurca rushed at him, seized the lapels of his coat and, shaking him, said:

"What are you doing here, Ferke?"

"Down with the fascists!" the latter said gnashing his teeth and trying to free himself.

Jurca controlled himself with difficulty. Someone mumbled threateningly behind him. On a wall, an unskilful hand had written awkwardly in block letters: *Jön Szállasy!** Then only did Jurca see Horváth leaning against the corner of a table. He had bitten his lips till they bled and was blinking continually, quite dazed. Jurca let go Ferke's lapels and went up to Horváth:

"Horváth!" he shouted. "You... here?"

He stumbled over Motzeanu's outstretched body, bent over it, raised the arm-chair, then lifted him up with some difficulty.

"Horváth!"

"The fascist fired!" somebody said. "We only intended to beat him up..."

"Comrade Horváth! What are you doing here? Have you anything in common with the instigator Ferke?"

Ferke walked backwards to the door and, when he reached it, shouted from there contemptuously:

"Shall we let them kill us because we are Hungarians?"

"Down with the facsists!"

"He fired... look at the pistol... He hit Gyuri Juhász in the leg."

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* In Hungarian: Szállasy 's coming!

Jurca kept staring at Horváth. He said slowly, stressing his words:

"You'll lose your membership for this, let me tell you!"

From outside came shouts and stamping.

"Send someone to announce the police," said Jurca in a low, weary voice. "The rest stay on here..."

"Now just look at that!" shouted Ferke, "damn your eyes! You've gone over to Maniu, haven't you?"

In the broken door there appeared a tall, fair fellow dressed in a leather jacket, followed by some big, strong men. Seeing Jurca, he attacked him. Horváth grasped a chair quickly and began to defend Jurca. In an instant, the fight began.

"Send somebody to the factory to fetch the workers!"

Jurca only defended himself. The fellow with the leather coat was trying to hit him between the eyes with a knuckle-duster. He struck him twice in the shoulder and Jurca felt his arm becoming numb. He realized that they were trying to separate him from the others. The man in the leather coat tried to trip him, and at that moment Jurca grasped his arm and twisted it until he dropped the knuckle-duster. From outside the stamping of heavy boots was heard.

"The army's coming!"

"The King and the nation!"

"Down with the communists!"

Jurca gave the fellow a push and walked up in front of the officer who was looking at him in bewilderment.

"I shall arrest you!" he whispered almost fearfully.

"Alright. I'll follow you!"

Two soldiers walked behind him, balancing their weapons.

"Room! Room! Make room!" shouted the officer trying to make his way through the crowd that had gathered in a compact mass before the club.

From a by-street the voices of a group of workers thundered:

"Down with the fascists!"

The officer seemed frightened; he did not know what to do.

"Let's go," said Jurca.

***

Andrei left the sitting, his mind in a whirl. He inhaled a deep breath of the pungent air of the November night. A black sky seemed to be pouring down on the city in waves of liquid darkness. He heard Schwartz behind him speaking to some young men:

"Yes, comrade, you did very well. Bring us the youths. We need honest, devoted young people... Andrei, wait for me. I'm coming..."

Andrei took a few steps and stopped under an unlit street-lamp. He passed his fingers over the wet, rough iron, then rubbed his burning, throbbing temples. He made an attempt to live over again this afternoon, but he felt that any evocation would have taken away some of its beauty.

The large, simple hall in which floated a heavy, harsh smoke reeking of tobacco, of factory smells, oil, iron, sweating bodies; these thin young men, poorly dressed, following with ardent eyes every motion of those round the table. Close to him sat a freckled-face apprentice about sixteen. He could not help fidgeting, he kept gazing at the opposite corner of the room, looking for someone, then, unable to control himself any longer, he whispered to Andrei:

"Comrade, I've come for the first time!"

"I too," said Andrei with a smile.

From all parts of the room, lads were standing up; they spoke about organization, about the output of the factory, about the fascist foremen carrying on sabotage. One of them proposed that these scoundrels should be either sacked or arrested. Schwartz answered calmly, and Andrei envied him the self-possession, the experience his words showed. At first, he felt somewhat of a stranger. All the things discussed seemed to him of overwhelming proportions. Someone said that at their mill, the "Indagrara," some Hungarian hooligans had beaten a Rumanian engineer. An oppressive silence fell in the room, then another man shouted:

"That engineer's a scoundrel. He isn't even a Rumanian, he's half German."

"Why beat him?"

"Silence, comrades, let's observe discipline in our talks!"

"Yes, let's observe revolutionary discipline."

Holtzmann, who sat next to Schwartz at the long table covered with a discoloured red cloth, rose briskly:

"This is comrade Holtzmann, the U.T.C. secretary," whispered the freckled young man. "Just you listen to him... He speaks like Engels... He's a Marxist."

"Comrades," began Holtzmann in a thin yet unaffected voice, "the main problem facing us, the members of the U.T.C., is the fight against chauvinism. Chauvinism is a poisoned weapon which the class enemy, both Hungarian and Rumanian, is using against us, in these times. Who profits by it if the Rumanian workers hate the Hungarian workers?"

He stopped as if waiting for an answer.

"The enemy!" shouted someone.

"Indeed, you're right, comrade, but let's analyse the matter thoroughly. Our class enemy intends to conceal one single thing from the proletariat: that their wealth, their prosperity is the fruit of the workers' sweat and blood. The workers, now as always, are dissatisfied: they live in poverty, they are hard driven. Sooner or later they will discover the causes of their poverty. So their attention must be diverted from these problems. Who are the champions of chauvinism today?"

"Maniu's men."

"Of course they are. The same men who get on very well with the Hortyist-fascists and the Hungarian bourgeois, on boards of directors. And why not? Haven't they the same object? To get rich through exploiting the working class. Comrades, we have to struggle with all our might to make clear to backward workers that, by accepting chauvinist slogans, they become the slaves of the bourgeoisie, they give themselves up with bound hands to the bourgeoisie. Rumanian, Hungarian, Jewish, Serbian workers have but one single aim: a better life, freedom, bread, education, democracy. Now, when all our efforts are made to supply the front, to win victory against fascism, the fiercest enemy of mankind, the bourgeoisie is trying to divert you from the road you took after our liberation by the Red Army. You have all heard of the Ip and Trăsnea massacres where the Hortyists killed hundreds of Ruma-

nian peasants. After our liberation the Maniu hordes committed crimes against the Hungarian peasants. There is among us a comrade who witnesses the massacres at Varseg. I entreat him to tell us who the criminals were and whom they killed. Please, comrade Sabin."

Andrei stood up perplexed.

"I've written about this!"

"Tell us, comrade, repeat it ten times; it will never be enough!"

As happened every time he thought of it, all became dim in front of Andrei: the lights went out, the eyes gazing at him from everywhere were blotted out; the intense grey of the sky, the smoke, the clamour and the crowd alone were left.

He spoke low, shuddering at his reminiscences. Amid an oppressive silence broken only by the heavy breathing of the young people around him, he told them everything and, when he concluded, the blood rushed to his cheeks. He sat down quickly. Somebody behind him said:

"It's true..."

Now he was standing there, stroking with his fingers the wet iron of the street-lamp. He would have liked to add to what he had previously said, his hopeful entreaty: "Folks, accept me among you... I have met you on my way which ends here, now I have regained possession of myself."

He looked behind: in the lighted doorway, Schwartz could not get rid of the young people around him. Andrei set out slowly for home, but somebody called him: it was Holtzmann. He caught up with him and patted him on the back:

"You spoke splendidly. Have you made up your mind?"

"Oh, yes," whispered Andrei. "I simply had to do it."

"Call on me tomorrow and we'll talk it over. Fill up our adherence card for the U.T.C."

"All right. Good-bye, comrade."

"Good-bye, Andrei."

While walking along the streets on his way home, Andrei wished he were with Sonia. Something overwhelming seethed within him. He felt stronger than ever.

Reaching home, he opened the gate and crossed the quiet, dark yard. Then he noticed that there was a light in the kitchen. He hurried in. His father was sitting at the table, his eyes heavy with sleep. On the gas-stove some water was boiling in a saucepan.

"It's me, dad," said Andrei taking off his coat quickly and hanging it up on a peg.

"Andrei, father wants to speak to you," said old Sabin solemnly. "Take a chair and sit down in front of your father".

"What's up?" Andrei said trying to joke. He was struck by the gravity stamped on his father's puffed-up face. He took a chair and sat down on its edge, trying hard not to smile.

"Andrei," started Sabin, "we are and have always been good Rumanians. I would never have thought that you... father's own boy..."

"What's happened?" Andrei burst out impatiently. (He had never talked about serious topics with his father. There was a tacit convention in the family: father is a decent fellow but rather narrow-minded.)

"Father is not going to exert any influence upon you; he only wants you to do well and be happy. As for my life... what could I say... it has no other purpose than your happiness, Andrei, sonny."

He stopped and puckered his forehead.

"Speak up plainly, father. I see there is something on your mind."

"Yes, there is. Why did you write that article? Aren't you ashamed, you, a Rumanian, the son of a Rumanian?"

"I wrote it precisely because I am a Rumanian," replied Andrei frowning.

"Baron Romulus Papp of Zerind, the president of the National Peasant party in our town, has called today. He came by car. Lucky I was at home. He wished to talk to you, Andrei. He admires you very, very much."

"I don't need his admiration!" snapped Andrei.

His father's cheeks quivered and covered themselves with a network of small red veins.

"Is that the way to talk?" shouted his father. "Do you know who Baron Papp of Zerind is? Andrei, father doesn't mean to influence you in any way..."

"He could not, anyhow," said Andrei with a smile. Then he was sorry he had said so.

His father stood up and stepped toward him.

"Is that how you talk to your father, Andrei?"

"Father, it's no use... I've chosen my way..."

"What way?" cried Sabin. "What way? Do you know that today the communists have killed lawyer Emil Motzeanu? Doctor Emil Motzeanu? They came to the Peasant Party Club in Russian motor-lorries with Russian soldiers and machine-gunned him."

"It's not true."

"Baron Papp of Zerind said to me: 'Your son, Mr. Sabin, is a very worthy young man, a Rumanian element whom we have watched carefully, in whom we put great hopes...' That's what the baron said..."

"Damn his eyes!"

Octavian was dumbfounded; he could hardly believe his ears.

"What I wrote is what I saw with my own eyes," shouted Andrei. "Do you know what it means to behead young men in front of their mothers and fathers?"

"It's not true!" screamed Sabin. "Rumanians don't do such things!"

"I saw them! And I won't keep silent. I won't, do you hear? I won't keep silent, not even if Papp, this weak-minded fool, or God himself ordered me to do so. I can't keep silent!"

"Shut up!" roared Sabin rushing at him. "Shut up or I'll...!"

"And if I won't?" said Andrei looking at him in a rage.

"Then my house is not the place for you: it's the house of an honest-minded Rumanian. You have no right to come to it. Tomorrow morning you'll go to Mr.Papp's — father orders you to do so — and you'll write in his paper that it's not true, that it is not true, do you understand?"

"No, I won't," answered Andrei beside himself.

"You won't?" screamed Sabin. "You won't? Then listen to me: there's no more room for you in your father's house. Go to your communists, to your Jews and Hungarians. Go away! Get out! Out of my house! You aren't my child any longer!"

"Alright," answered Andrei. "Alright."

He rose from his chair and snatched his coat. He saw once more the livid face of his father, then opened the door:

"I'm off! You won't make me a renegade — nor you, nor God. Nobody!"

"Get out!" cried Sabin. "Out! Out!"

Andrei slammed the door, making the window-panes shake. He did not turn round, so he did not see his father collapse, his forehead hitting the table. He unlocked the gate and threw the key furiously on the pavement. A shooting pain went through his heart. 'And now . . . where to?' He was very hungry. He had eaten nothing since noon. He searched his pockets. He had one thousand lei left from aunt Emilia's money. He decided to go to a restaurant. Then, what? The street, the bare chestnut-trees, the dark windows behind which the bourgeois were making love or were having their suppers — things of the past. . .

In the restaurant he found no free seat. He began to wonder where he should go to, and decided he would go to Schwartz's. He could hardly get onto the crowded trams. Motzeanu's death was being discussed: some passengers cursed the communists. Somebody said that Motzeanu fired the pistol and shot himself by mistake, but the people swore at him terribly, called him a traitor to the nation, so that the fellow felt frightened and said nothing more.

Andrei got off the tram, walked along the muddy streets, entered Schwartz's courtyard and watched the window of his room. It was dark and the blinds were down. He began to whistle, but nobody answered. Then he went in front of the house and pressed the bell, listening to the echo of the prolonged, shrill tinkle. After a long while the door was half opened and a woman's voice asked:

"What do you want?"

"I'm looking for Schwartz, for Iani."

"Iani? He lives no longer in this house. He's gone. He's angry with us, Iani, and I told him . . . 'Ianika, my dear boy, don't meddle with such things. The neighbours say that you may be hanged one day, Ianika. . .' We quarrelled and he went away. . . Oh dear me, dear me! What will become of us? I'm his mother, I'm Mrs. Schwartz. My husband is dead, and I'm all alone. . . I haven't been

able to look after Ianika... I had to sew, to mend, and he ... he's gone, he lives at Mr. Robber's on Independence Street N^0 74. I couldn't have believed that my son would become a communist, just now when people say that we, Jews shall have our own country, that we shall be free to leave... It was a very hard life. Wherever we go, we're looked down on as Jews. Ianika suffered very much when he was expelled from school. Mr. Robber lives in Independence Street N^0. 74. If you go there... Just a moment... Please come in. I'll give you something for him. I've got some egg-plant salad preserved in tomato juice for winter. Wait a moment, please. He lives at Mr. Robber's."

The woman ran in hastily, shuffling her slippers on the shaky rickety stairs. She was back immediately, pressed a few bottles and slipped a bank-note into his hand.

"Please tell him to come home and leave the communists, as, oh, God, it's going to be hard. All the neighbours curse him. Poor Ianika, he wouldn't harm a fly, but people are wicked today. Tell him to come home as I've found a situation for him at Mr. Sonnenbrun's. I've spoken to Rabbi Silbermann too. He said he'd take him if Iani wants... Speak to him!"

"All right, madam. I will. Good night."

Schwartz's mother shouted after him:

"Tell him I will work, that he shall have everything he wants, if only he comes back and gives up..."

With the bottles of salad in his arms, Andrei felt ridiculous. He was hungry. About midnight, he reached the indicated address. He rang. After a time, which seemed very long to him, the door opened and a bald skull appeared.

"I'm looking for comrade Robber," said Andrei embarrassed.

"Robber? He doesn't live here. He is in Petersburg. He's been there for quite a long time, for several years. He acts there in plays, yes, he does... Go... go... to Petersburg. That's where he is..."

"Who's asking for me?" echoed Robber's sonorous voice. "Is it anybody from the party, papa?"

"I don't know," whimpered the old man. "He's got something in his arms... some bottles..."

"It's me, comrade Robber... Andrei Sabin..."

"You? What's the matter? Papa, let him come in."

"Yes... Come in, sir, if you please... I'm an old man.

Jacquot's making me cut the labels out of the books... What a lot of books he has! So many... Schiller, Goethe, Heine, Klopstock, Ossian... Oh, how many... I shall translate them all... Rebecca will be glad. But now I must cut the labels out... with a shaving blade... oho... *Kennst du das Land wo die Zitronen blühn...*"

"Come in, comrade Sabin," said Robber. Come in."

Andrei stepped on to the thick carpet that covered the hall. Behind him, the old man's haunting voice was heard:

"I'll translate them all. Then we'll leave for Eretz!"

Robber looked at Andrei in surprise, then stepped aside to make room for him to enter. The room was small enough and crammed with books. Schwartz, sitting on a sofa, looked inquiringly at Andrei:

"What's the matter with you?"

"I 've brought you these from your home, from your mother," said Andrei glumly. "There you are."

He set the bottles on the table among dossiers and sheets of paper, then stood motionless.

"But what's the matter? Why did you look for me?"

"You see, I v'e quarrelled with my old father. I thought I might come and stay with you."

"Now isn't that funny?" Schwartz began to laugh, dropping back on the pillows, shaking with bursts of laughter. "So we have both fallen out with the bourgeois class. Fine! Jacquot, your house is going to be turned into a night-shelter. Have you room for Andrei?"

"Yes, of course," said Robber quite unruffled. "I'll make up a bed for him on these books here."

He quickly and dexterously untied a bale of books, laid them on the floor in a few layers and took some dirty bed-clothes out of a wardrobe, beckoning to Andrei to take off his clothes.

"You shall sleep upon the treasures of world literature," he grimaced pleasantly. "I've put out Shakespeare's complete works. If you prefer another bed — Voltaire, Tolstoy, Balzac — you've just got to say so. The works of those classics are bulky enough."

Thereupon he paid no more attention to him. He sat down on the side of Schwartz's bed and resumed a talk they had begun:

"You're still a child, Schwartz, that is why you judge with your heart, you delight in doing it. Generally, in Rumania, people judge little, in the strict sense of the word, little and badly. I do not mean in philosophy which does not exist here, but in literature and art. Our geniuses discovered, with a blissful and childish feeling of pride, truths that in France were commonplace in the th 16th century, and in the East at the time when we were still living like monkeys. ...Of course it's not only a question of influences — of that secret subterranean circuit, the circuit of art — but of the fact that we Rumanians have never discovered the world all by ourselves... We have had no revolution of our own, none except perhaps the wretched 1848 one, and this in Transylvania; in the old kingdom it was a parody, something preposterous. We haven't got a clear idea of what a revolution really is..."

"Why is that, according to you?"

"Because we judge of it subjectively, with our heart and our stomach: the simpler the ideas are expressed, the more they delight us. It's hunger that leads us on. Try an experiment: explain to a group of men Marxist dialectics, its principles, and see then if they are ready to climb on barricades... They won't, they will be conquered by the counter-revolution with the waving of a tricoloured rag, with a noisy military band and a priest, a gifted orator... A vulgar litography — the homeland represented as a woman wearing a national costume, with her bosom torn by a serpent, will move them to tears more than the shattering dialectic principles of death and birth joined together in the same unity..."

"Then you think that..." said Schwartz looking puzzled.

"Well, what I think doesn't matter, now especially. These are troubled times, the enemies act openly, attack you, beat you, and you attack and hit back. But later on, when the bourgeoisie will have been annihilated and..."

"Then?"

"Of course, you think that at that very moment, it will be heaven on earth, don't you? You are wrong, my

dear boy. It's only then that you will witness great, obscure, incomprehensible fights. He who will contemplate them coldly, like some petrified tempests, will be a lucky dog!"

"But Lenin says. . ."

"Lenin was an unrivalled genius, but no human genius — I hope you don't believe in genii — will be able to comprehend or foresee the future. Do not forget that a revolution is, alas, made by men, not by Nietzsche's supermen who have gone beyond joy or pain."

"As a matter of fact, I don't understand what you're driving at. We started from something quite clear."

"Yes," said Robber turning to Andrei who was listening to them attentively. "Comrade Schwartz was complaining to me today. He said that during the illegality every task he was assigned became immediately *his own*, an integral part of himself. And now, when the party has come out of an illegal position, the small daily matters such as the establishment of a canteen at the "Indagrara" seem to him *somehow* odd. Have I put it clearly? Yes . . . And I told him that, instead of worrying him, this symptom ought to delight him: it is evidence of political maturity, of political wisdom. If the tasks of the revolution start burning on your head, like straw, you run the risk of being consumed by the flames, of falling, of devoting yourself to a single duty, as second-hand artists do with a single work. . . Like artists, the revolutionaries have no discernment, as long at the phenomena occurring set them on fire. . ."

"As far as I know, a revolutionary must combine a practical spirit with ardent passion."

Robber continued with a tinge of indulgence:

"Of course, there are formulations which are meant for the masses, aren't there?"

"Do you make a distinction between the leaders and the masses?" shouted Schwartz.

"I? How could I?. . . It is made by reality itself. . . So, reality must be made up a bit, to become inviting. Plato's ideas are. . . a little crabbed."

"I'm under the impression that you turn things upside-down," said Schwartz uncertain. (Andrei was irked: he had thought just the same at that very moment.)

"No, I don't. It's just your imagination," said Robber shaking his head energetically. "Study dialectics, both of you, the only non-sentimental system, as accurate as a calculating-machine which makes no mistake. You'll see I'm right... Let's go to bed. It's nearly two."

He undressed, switched off the light, then slipped under the blanket, yawning.

"Luckily," he said, "the bourgeoisie are incapable of understanding Marxism. It's a language quite unknown to them, otherwise we'd meet with difficulties."

Andrei suddenly remembered his father's words in connection with Motzeanu's murder.

"What happened in town today?" he asked. "I heard that lawyer Motzeanu had been..."

"Don't you know? Some Hungarian workers beat him up to death. He died in hospital... A very unpleasant affair. A well-known *agent provocateur*, a certain Ferke, got in among them. To make matters worse, young Horváth is mixed up in this affair. Jurca was immediately set free by the police. I heard they want to expell Horváth from the Party. In fact, what can one expect? A revolution can't be made with velvet gloves. And why the devil do they write intentionally irritating articles! Let's go to sleep now."

Andrei tossed about for a long time. He was disappointed. All this talk, Robber's conceit, annoyed him. He was sick of words, and the state he was in was a cause of unrest. He tried not to think of what would happen to him, of his father left alone in the deserted house, in an agony of pain, because his world had collapsed. 'Why can't we communicate even with those nearest to us? So many barriers, so many walls that have to be demolished so that men can get acquainted. Yes, it is worth the struggle...'

The next day Robber got up very early, opened the window and began to perform strange gymnastics, like a ritual. He breathed deeply making his veins swell, clasped his fingers as though in prayer, let himself sank down on the carpet, and touched his knees with his forehead.

"It's one of his hobbies," said Schwartz with a sarcastic laugh. "Yoga, to strengthen his power of concentration. You see, every great man must be a little cracked."

They ate in a hurry some bread toasted in oil and drank weak tea. Then Schwartz turned to Andrei, scratching his head:

"What are you doing today? I have a committee meeting, then I must go to the "Indagrara." I'm busy all the day long."

Andrei was embarrassed and kept his eyes fixed on the floor.

"Come along with me," said Robber. "I'll talk to Jurca about you. Perhaps... You understand, the party is not too rich..."

"That's not the point. I've no intention of becoming a pensioner of any institution."

"Come, come, get rid of your bourgeois pride," said Robber with a frown. "Your position is difficult enough."

On the way, after a pause, Robber went on:

"The position of the intellectual is generally difficult enough. '*De ci, de là, pareil à la feuille morte.*' Our thoughts are free, in the abstract, but this does not feed you. We have no enemies to the left, as good old Anatole France said, but... But... I envy papa many times. He lives in the moon. He believes he is at Jassy... He told me yesterday that he had met Mr. N. Bădărău, the Minister of Justice in 1904. Well, don't worry. If you feel inclined to renounce your personality, your future is assured."

"I'm not at all inclined to do so."

"Well... well... We'll talk later. With the well-known capacity of a clergyman to justify all his abdications, you'll succeed in glorifying the black, stating that it is rosy, or vice versa."

"I shall never do so."

"Study dialectics, my friend. Down with sentimentalism!"

Andrei found nothing else to say. No doubt, Robber was far more intelligent than he was; he juggled easily with notions that were disturbing for Andrei through their novelty. He told him so. Robber laughed, flattered:

"There are epochs — I don't know if they are happy ones or not — in which the essential problems, the great co-ordinates, life and death, become the daily subjects both of the labourer and of the head of the state. You get

used to them. In the end you even like them. It is, if you like, *l'attrait du précipice* which alpinists speak of. Look, here we are. I'll speak to Jurca about you. Let me tell you something: do not make it a matter of conscience; come among us, tell Jurca that the reading of booklets has convinced you, that you're ready to shed your blood for the cause of the working class. It's clear that for a period, which may be very long, the future belongs to the communists... Why not..."

Andrei frowned:

"It wouldn't be fair of me..."

Robber blushed with anger:

"Do as you choose. After all, it's your own business."

He left him in the passage and entered the office. He soon came out, informing him frigidly that Jurca was attending a sitting, but that Schwartz had announced him. He hesitated for a moment, then said:

"You've taken a step which has excluded you for ever from your social category. Ponder over this."

Andrei leaned against the wall. The waiting seemed too long to him. He was tired. He thought slowly: 'I have no place to go to, now. Tonight...' He did not want to go back to Robber's: his cynicism was repulsive to him. He always seemed to think of something else than of what he talked, but, all of a sudden, would be carried away by his own words and believe them.

Later on, the door opened and the worker who had come to his place to fetch him, came out staggering. He was pale, his face covered with bruises. His gaze fell on Andrei. At first he did not recognize him, then he said through his lips tightly pressed together:

"Well, I've been expelled from the party. I got a letter from my people at home. My brother was murdered... Yes, yes..."

Andrei wanted to go to Holtzmann, but the latter was talking heatedly with a bald little old man who was pulling nervously at his long, flaxen moustache:

"Now you must take care of him, Uncle Horváth..."

"Yes... yes... of course..."

"We'll keep our eye on him, you know..."

"Yes... yes... of course..."

The old man pulled his fur cap over his ears and ran out quickly.

"Look at that runaway," said Jurca who had come out into the passage accompanied by an elderly man with silvery hair and moustache and a wrinkled forehead.

"Good luck, comrade Sabin. This is father..."

"Hallo, my boy!" old Jurca said, shaking his hand. He kept it long in his own callous hands, as if weighing it. Andrei felt a little embarrassed.

"Has your father turned you out of doors?"

"It looks like it," replied Andrei trying to laugh. "Baron Papp called on him."

"Oh... I know your father from the station... A very decent fellow. When we had to fight the Germans, he behaved bravely. Bravely... Hm..." The old man filled his short, charred pipe. "I know Sabin, of course I do. A great nationalist... Rumanian," he said laughing without malice. "What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know."

"D'you know what?" He turned towards his son. "I shall get him into our factory. That's what I'll do."

Jurca scratched his forehead.

"We'll see later..."

"I'm off," said the old man. "I want to look for young Horváth. What a madcap! Maybe he will become the second father Mahno. Do you know who Mahno was?" he said turning to Andrei. "You don't. But where are you to live? You've got nowhere to go. Come to my place in Solfeggio Street N° 5. Be sure to remember the name, it's silly enough. Come, don't stand on ceremony. Ta-ta."

"Speak to comrade Robber," said Jurca to Andrei. "He may give you something to write. You've got a great talent. You can go about all over the place and get to know a great many things. This is our school nowadays. You'll steel yourself in the fire of the fight. Money... I mean wages... I don't know about them for the time being. We're that poor..."

"That's not the point..."

"In three days we're setting up a canteen. You'll have your meals there. And now I'm off. Good luck."

Left alone, Andrei said to himself: 'I'll go to Sonia's. It's such a long time since we last saw each other, and so many things have happened since then. A little peace and quiet, a little oblivion, like the pause made after a long journey. It's only then that things begin to get their outline... life.'

Schwartz came in sight followed by some ten young men. They were carrying heaps of newspapers under their arms.

"Andrei!" he shouted. "Won't you come with us? Revolutionary action for the spreading of the party press. Maybe you don't like beginning your career as a journalist by selling newspapers? Have you spoken to Jurca? It's the best solution. This man solves everything in his stride. He's wonderful. Well, what are you going to do? Are you coming?"

"Let's go," said Andrei.

Schwartz showed them the way. Andrei was given a sector in the suburbs. At first he was pleased: he realized Schwartz intended to spare him meeting his former acquaintances.

"Give me another street. Somewhere in the centre. D'you understand, there are more people about. It's easier when you have no experience!"

Schwartz looked at him affectionately, then began to laugh.

"All right, walk along the boulevard and Episcopia Street. Be careful, it's none to easy work! Good luck! At noon we meet here. I'll take you to lunch."

Outside, a pale sun flooded the dirty streets with its whitish light. Andrei had thought that they would walk in groups. Now, all by himself, he began to feel ill-at-ease but, annoyed at himself shook off this feeling. He hurried to reach the boulevard, then began to look around him. He had forgotten to ask how he would have to sell the paper, so that he went up to a tall, fair-haired man dressed in a new leather coat.

"Will you buy 'The Patriot'? " he asked blushing.

The man cast an icy glance at him and said between his teeth:

"See you hanged first!"

Andrei was dumbfounded. All his blood rushed to his cheeks and, for a moment, he was tempted to lay down the newspapers and rush at him. An elderly man, who had lit his cigarette some distance away, came up to him and said merrily:

"Let me see what you've got there, my lad? 'The Patriot'? Fine. Give me three copies as I'm going to the workshop where my comrades will snatch them out of my hand. Is it the latest issue? That's right... Any interesting events?"

"Yes," said Andrei in a thin voice...

The man handed him the money, took the papers, then, bending towards him, asked him confidentially:

"You belong to the U.T.C., don't you?"

"Yes," nodded Andrei. "Yes... Thank you."

"Freedom!" said the man raising his closed fist.

By eleven o'clock he had sold about twenty copies. Some people bought one in a hurry and walked on reading, others addressed him through clenched teeth: "get out, you beast!" but Andrei was angry no more. He swore savagely at an elderly man who had flown at him although he hadn't offered him the paper. Stupefied, the man threatened him with his stick, but seeing Andrei's green eyes glitter, he went away muttering something about communist hordes. Further on Andrei met another newsboy shouting at the top of his voice:

"Tomorrow funeral of lawyer Motzatu! Killed by the anarpists! Great demonstration! Priests, crosses, mass, *colivă** ! Silver coffin! Maybe a fight!... It's sure not to rain! Grand funeral!"

When the crush and bustle around him subsided, he caught sight of Andrei and made a face at him:

"Hey, d'you see what competition is? That's how you ought to shout: Great sensation... Worker killed by Maniu's men! Maniu's crimes! Mr. Maniu's sweethearts! Sensational!... You sell all you have in a jiffy and at a higher price. You'll even have money for fags, I assure you. Come along and learn from me. Here, give me a paper!"

---

* Cake of boiled corn and walnuts, distributed after a burial, in memory of the deceased

He snatched it from his hand, went up to a lady dressed in furs and said frowning:

"Buy 'The Patriot'! It's only the people's enemies who don't buy it, those who hate us... The reactionaries! Take it! Twenty lei. Thank you on behalf of the people!"

He came up to Andrei and began to laugh:

"What'll you pay for the lesson? Just stare at the bourgeois like Bill Baxter to make them think you carry a pistol in your pocket. How much will you pay?"

"Thank you, comrade," said Andrei with a smile.

"H'm, look at him!" muttered the boy. "Never mind... comrade. I'm off." And he went away shouting as loud as he could: "Grand burial, floods of tears. Mr. Papp's speech: 'To honest-minded Rumanians. Only twenty lei! The funeral, gratis!"

Andrei still had a few copies and passed along Episcopia Street where he suddenly collided with Teddie Varga. The latter was wearing an eccentric checked overcoat, a flat hat like a pan-cake and a loosely bound flowery necktie. At first he did not recognize him, then he turned and shouted:

"Hello, boys! Come on... come on...* Come on and see Andrei Sabinoff as newsboy. For shame!" and he spat down at Andrei's feet just when next to him appeared Văgălău, Micky Belega, Gigi Moldoveanu, Horia Spinanțiu, all dressed most smartly.

"Hallo!" bawled Teddie shrilly. "Look at the traitor! You've gone over to the Bolsheviks, have you? You're writing articles for them... I hope they pay you well, for I see you in rags and as thin as a lath."

"Let me pass!"

"Just look at him! Maybe you're ashamed of your former 'bourgeois acquaintances,' comrade. You weren't ashamed of swearing at the Rumanians, were you? Thunder and devil * ! Lucky that I met you, to spit in your face. Do you know your friends have murdered Mr. Motzeanu? Answer, comrade! Answer, comrade!"

---

* In English in the text

"Make room!" said Andrei between his teeth, "or..."

"Or what? You'll murder me too, won't you? Strike me with a bar?" He held out his hand and, snatching the papers from under Andrei's arm, flung them up in the air. The next instant, Andrei struck him right in the chin. Teddie fell on his back, into Văgălău's arms. The blood gushed out of his mouth, running down his yellow necktie with a lotus flower pattern.

"How dare you hit him?" Văgălău shouted coming forward and rolling up the sleeves of his overcoat. "How dare you?"

Andrei waited no longer. He flew at him, hit him in the face, but Văgălău avoided the blow, swiftly leaning against the wall. The fist just grazed him slightly near the ear. Gigi Moldoveanu made a rugby leap and clasped both his legs at the knees. Micky Belega hit him in the chest and Văgălău, his underlip hanging down, sent his fist in Andrei's nose. Andrei felt no pain. He fell down on the pavement as though he had been cut down, hanging on to Văgălău's narrow trousers. He twisted, succeeding to get rid of Micky Belega, and hit Horia hard in the stomach.

"Beat him!" cried Teddie Varga breathing stertorously, whilst the blood was running down his face. "Beat him, damn his eyes!"

The gang jumped on him and pinned him down. Văgălău sat astride him and began to hit him methodically in the face. Andrei's head went from right to left, like a loose marble.

When Văgălău stood up, Andrei stretched on one side.

"Stop! Stop, and let me piss on him!" roared Teddie trying to unbutton his trousers with his glove red with blood.

Andrei mustered all his strength and rose to his knees, but Văgălău kicked him in the eyes.

Somebody shouted in a hoarse voice:

"Hey there! What are you doing? Come on, brothers!"

Footsteps were heard on the asphalt.

A young man as thin as a lath, his fair hair sticking out in disorder from under an old, torn cap, rushed up Waving a wet house-painter's brush. He struck Văgălău

with it over the face, painting him green, then, brandishing it like a club, covered the others' impeccable suits with stains. An elderly man, as white as a miller from white-washing, slapped Micky Belega's face; the latter took to his heels followed by the others. The young man with the dishevelled hair lifted Andrei and propped him up against the wall. His left eye was closed, and a stream of blood was running out of his torn mouth and broken nose.

"Has anyone a clean handkerchief?" asked the young man holding him in his arms.

Nobody had.

"I have one in my pocket..." whispered Andrei.

The young man mopped him carefully. As through a mist Andrei saw his thin, narrow wrinkled face with almost black rings round his eyes.

"Where do you live?"

Andrei tried to say something, but could not. He felt like vomiting, his whole head felt empty. He kept spitting blood. Passing his numbed fingers over his left eye, he felt a painful swelling as hard as a plum.

"Here are your papers," said one of the masons, handing him the dirty, torn newspapers. "Damn the lot of them!"

"Dodi, I'll take him to my home. Work for me, will you?"

"All right."

"Can you walk?" he asked Andrei.

"Yes." He gathered all his strength, but was obliged to lean heavily on the young man's shoulder.

"Have you money for a cab?"

"No, I haven't!"

"Neither have I... damn it all... We'll take one as far as my place. The wife will borrow from somewhere."

But no cabby would take them. They feared their cushions would get dirty. The two young men dragged along for hours, stopping at every step. The young mason was swearing continually, more and more angrily. After a time, Andrei no longer realized what way they were going. He walked on mechanically, endeavouring to put one foot after the other. They had got as far as the outskirts. Small, mean houses in the murky grey of the late autumn...

"Good heavens, Ştefan... what is it? What's happened?

"It's a comrade. He's been beaten by hooligans..."

A frightfully thin young girl, dressed in a short, far too wide gown, rushed up to them, got hold of Andrei's arm and helped him to cross the high threshold. They entered a room with an earthen floor. A bed without mattress, a cupboard, a table, a chair and a cradle in which a baby was crying, were all the furniture.

"Lie down," said the young man. He sat down on a chest and mopped the abundant sweat off his forehead.

"Illi," he asked, "have we anything to eat?"

"I borrowed two eggs. I'll make you scrambled eggs."

"Please don't..." said Andrei.

"Shut up!" snapped the young man.

Andrei now only noticed that the "girl" was a young woman though a mere child.

"My wife," the young man introduced her. "My name is Ştefan Gherasim."

The woman came back bringing a wash-basin with hot water.

"Let me wash your face," she whispered and, kneeling beside him, passed over his face the wet corner of a soft towel. Without looking up she said: "Why don't you chaps give up politics? Better if we had food rather than your beating and killing each other."

"Can you have food if you don't fight?" asked Gherasim sententiously. "And stop nagging at me."

The child cried shrilly.

"He's hungry," said the woman. "I'll give him haricot bean soup rightaway. Won't you take off your coat?" she asked Andrei. "Come on, help him, what are you waiting for?" she shouted to Gherasim who had begun to read the newspaper.

Soon a soft numbness came over Andrei. He felt the blood flowing slowly, but thickly, through all his body, and with each throb of his heart his wounded eye ached. After a while, the woman tapped him gently on the shoulder:

"I've brought you some food..."

"No..."

"Please, eat it."

She helped him to sit up and set on his knees a cracked china tray on which were an egg, a thin slice of bread

and a bit of rancid butter. She gave him a clean napkin. Andrei, however, could swallow nothing. Ştefan ate quickly, greedily. He lit a cigarette.

"I'll go and work at the cotton mill," he said looking in another direction. "For the time being, as a day-labourer."

"God grant. When's Globek to pay you?"

"Tomorrow."

"'Tomorrow... tomorrow...' he says every day. We are up to the neck in debt. The neighbours refuse to give us any more."

"What do you want me to do?" he shouted. "Hang myself? It can't be helped, can it?"

"Every day..." she whispered, then stopped. She went out of the room.

"You haven't even told me your name," the young man said coming to the bed.

"Andrei Sabin."

"So it was you who wrote that article in the paper. That's why you were thrashed."

The blood rushed to Andrei's face.

"Never mind," he said gnashing his teeth. "I'll..."

Ştefan began to laugh:

"You'd like to have a machine-gun now and do them in, wouldn't you? Well, their time will come. Are you in the party?"

"In the U.T.C."

"I put down my name last week. Where do you live?"

"In Mărăşeşti Street, but father turned me out..."

"Hm... You'll sleep here, with us."

"Where?"

"In the bed. Where else, hang it all?"

"And what about you?"

"On the floor. We have two very good quilts... We haven't sold them yet."

"I couldn't possibly..."

"Shut up!"

The day passed slowly. Andrei fell asleep several times, tortured by nightmares. He heard what the two said as through a fog:

"He has no home, Illi. His father turned him out... a bourgeois. He's to stay here with us..."

"It's alright. But let's get something for supper."

"I'm off to Globek's. It's a fortnight since he has not paid me a copper."

Later on, Ştefan coughed painfully and Andrei opened his eyes.

"I fear my lungs are gone," said Gherasim shyly. "That would be the last straw... now."

Towards evening Andrei had a temperature. They laid wet cloths on his face, and the woman said anxiously:

"I hope nothing is broken inside his body. You must go to his father, Ştefan."

"Not I ! The dirty bourgeois!"

'Poor father!' Andrei said to himself. 'If he knew...'

The next morning Ştefan returned with money and the district doctor, a stout, jolly man. He tapped Andrei on the back, asked him to say ninety-nine, and wrote out a prescription for an ointment for his eye, then said politely:

"Two hundred lei. A little fight after a booze?"

A fight with the class enemy," declared Ştefan gravely.

The doctor became nervous and left, repeating that it was nothing serious, that young men need, at times... They have to sow their wild oats... Good-bye, good-bye... as a friend, not as a physician, good-bye..."

In spite of all his efforts, Andrei could not get up. He was ashamed to be obliged to let himself be looked after by unknown people, and he told Ştefan this. The latter replied harshly and his obviously feigned brutality did Andrei good.

Ştefan stayed with him all the morning. He told him the story of his life. Since the age of ten he had tried all sorts of jobs, the oddest: he had bred canaries, had sold pumpkin seed, had been baker, sandwich-man, arena sweep in a circus, sign-board painter, docker at Brăila, then a sailor on the Danube, during the war.

August 23 had found him in Budapest, and the Hungarians had thrown him into a concentration camp from where he fled. During the whole siege he lived in a cellar together with his wife. There, in the cellar, their baby had been born on the 7th of November. After the liberation they came to Rumania, because in Budapest people were

dying of hunger. They had arrived in the town four months before, and lived on what they obtained from selling the few things they still had.

Andrei was drawn to Ştefan by the harsh way in which he treated him; under his rashness he tried to conceal his tenderness. He confessed that he had read very much on board ship during his free time. He had also tried to write poems, copying Eminescu, and he would have liked to become a painter. He was very restless, could hardly keep quiet a moment, and smoked incessantly, making himself cigarettes with bits of newspaper. His wife gathered the cigarette ends in a box. Ştefan had an ardent confidence in the future. When he spoke about this, his blue eyes would shine under a transparent haze of tears. He rushed to the baby's cradle, took him up in his arms and danced with him about the room, calling him sometimes "engineer," sometimes "general," or even "scholar."

"A little lump, a piece of humanity, and he doesn't realize how far he will get, the little beggar. During the siege, after his birth, my wife had no milk. We fed him on maize porridge and bean soup, and he was never ill. He's as hard as steel... the little beggar... he will soon speak. He has two teeth and the third is on its way."

Ştefan, on the contrary, hadn't a tooth left. When in the camp, a German sentry had smashed them all with the butt-end of his gun. Consequently, he laughed shyly, as old women do, and mostly with his eyes.

In the evening they read parts of The Communist Manifesto.

"The future belongs to the proletarians, that's clear," he said waving his fist in the air. "It's as simple as Columbus' egg, but Marx had to come and prove it."

"Oh, yes... our bourgeoisie is on its last legs. I know them... Polished vileness... Would stoop to any dirty trick. What is dreadful is that these men have monopolized the notion of 'homeland,' have taken it or, better said, have stolen it..."

"They'll have to return it," shouted Ştefan.

"What's all that you're saying there?" put in Illi, who was darning stockings. "Was it not all right before? Had we not sufficient food? My father was a barber.

He had a small shop, his own. And how well we fared! Every Saturday we went out of town. And when we met, Ştefan, weren't things all right, tell me? We had no care in the world. We danced, we were happy..."

"Yes, but then came the war," said Ştefan darkly. "The war too was made by them. And your father, the decent barber, sided with them."

"Don't talk nonsense and leave my dad alone."

"No... Our life was worthless," said Andrei thoughtfully. "Perhaps we were not wholy to blame. Many of us knew nothing... But that is the truth..."

"What does your mother say?" asked Illi.

"She died two months ago."

"What sort of a man is your old father?" asked Ştefan quickly.

Andrei thought long before describing him. He told them about their life, his father's merely childish obstinacy, the action at the railway station.

"You must go to him," Ştefan advised him when he had finished.

"Never. Let him go to..."

"Hush!" said Illi.

"Never!" said Andrei angrily.

"It's inhuman to leave him like that," said Ştefan looking at him severely. "If he is as you say, you should not..."

Andrei realized that Ştefan was right, but he could not give in. He asked Ştefan to go to the Party and tell Schwartz what had happened. Ştefan came back with Schwartz. The latter shook Andrei by the hand vigorously. He had brought some cakes from town, as people do to a sick person, and it made Andrei laugh.

"We've been wondering what had happened to you. We thought you'd deserted. You're going to work for the newspaper. Everything's been arranged. Get well as soon as possible. We've found lodgings for you too. In the Notre Dame Boarding School, a sort of hostel for us, the homeless, has been opened. We shall be together. Will that be alright.?"

"Yes, quite alright."

"Hurry and get better. Great things are in the offing. We've begun a campaign against beating in the army, against

the sabotage of the purging action in the civil service. The members of the so-called historical parties are rabid." He turned to Ştefan: "Have you arranged about your job?"

"I think so."

"Well, I've got to be going. I have to attend a sitting." He went near Andrei and whispered: "I've brought you some money..."

"But..."

"Shut up! Good luck!"

That evening they feasted like lords: fried bacon with onion, maize porridge and two litres of wine. Andrei had never become friendly with somebody so quickly. The friendship with Lucian had been painful, suspicious, as if each of them had feared the other was concealing something. A stupid craving for absoluteness, for something that would solve between both of them all the great questions of the world...

Now, flushed by the wine, Andrei felt better than ever.

"The future epoch," he said, "must be an epoch of creation. Engineers, teachers, workers, must be creators in their work, like Beethoven. I think that happiness is not possible without it."

"That's what communism means..."

"It ought rather to mean bread," said Illi smiling.

"Bread..." Ştefan nodded. "That goes without saying."

They sat up together late into the night, after Illi had gone to bed. They were both slightly tipsy. They talked — passing from one subject to the other — about war and painting, about how the new towns would have to be built and about poetry. Ştefan read to Andrei a few of his verses. They were naïve, but Andrei found them lovely. Then they quarrelled a little because Ştefan cursed the peasants. They fare pretty well now, they do business, they get rich, and townsfolk starve. There ought to be a sort of war communism, as there had been in Russia after the revolution.

Andrei flew into a passion and told him about Mitru, about Ardeleanu.

"You're not right. For centuries, the peasant has been in the dark... The intellectuals have betrayed him, that's the true reason."

All he said seemed to him overwhelmingly new. He felt an unusual energy seething in him. Yes, Jurca had found the proper solution. He would be a journalist. He would travel everywhere, condemn vileness without sparing anyone.

"Tell me, Andrei, are you in love?" Ştefan asked him.

Andrei went red all over.

"No."

"It's a lie."

"I don't know whether I'm in love or not. I think this isn't the right time for such..."

"You're talking rot. He who doesn't love is not human."

This made him tell Ştefan about Sonia. 'If you were here, now — he thought — I could have told you everything, and you would understand me. We have both gone through so much that we can no longer hide our thoughts and feelings from each other. Something new has happened and it compels us to be ourselves.'

"I haven't been to see her," he said, "since I returned. We parted last summer."

"Why haven't you?"

"I haven't the slightest idea..."

"What a queer person you are," said Ştefan in astonishment. "Will you go tomorrow?"

"Maybe."

"No, not maybe. You'll go and see her tomorrow."

"All right. I'll go."

They went to bed. But neither could fall asleep. They could hardly wait for the day to break.

CHAPTER XX

Though Ştefan's wife did all she could to keep him in bed, on the third day Andrei rose, put on his clothes and asked for a looking-glass. He was terrified by his appearance. He had grown thinner, the bones of his face stuck out through the brownish skin, and his bruised lips hurt. With his left eye he saw things as through a mist. His hair had grown unusually long. He tried to trim it about the temples with the scissors, but he did it all wrong. He was annoyed at the idea of going to see Sonia in such a state.

On entering the room, Illi was taken aback to see him ready to go:

"Why don't you stay a little longer? Don't you realize what a sight you are?"

"I've got to go," said Andrei gravely.

"You know, it's been snowing. Look!" She drew back the thin, torn curtain. All the neighbourhood was

covered with a thin layer of snow that was melting, thus letting black patches appear, like birds that had fallen in their flight, their wings wide apart. How could he thank that woman? Words would be vain. He took her small child-like hand and kissed it. She felt embarrassed and pretended to be busy with the pillow.

"Come and see us... whenever you like... Andrei. You'll meet Ştefan at today's demonstration."

"What kind of demonstration is it?"

"I don't know... against the government, it seems..."

The weather was cold and wet, and Andrei contracted his shoulders, shivering. In the streets the snow had been melted by car-wheels and footsteps: it had become a dirty brownish mire. Andrei was walking fast and presently felt warm and unbuttoned his coat.

Opposite the Party headquarters there was a large crowd of men and, when he was about to enter, he heard his name being called. He turned round, surprised, and saw Rodica, his cousin. She was wearing an elegant grey astrakhan fur-coat, high rubber-boots and a hat with a very broad brim in front. For a moment he was stunned, not knowing what to do. She did not move from the opposite pavement. She only beckoned to him, insistently, to come over. When he came nearer, she stared, put her arms round his neck and began to cry.

"What's the matter with you, Andrei? Oh, how you look, Andrei! Dear me! It's horrible. Who did you fight with?"

She smelt of good perfume, and there was something provocative in the way she stamped. She wiped her eyes hastily and said, too quickly to be reproving:

"Andrei, why did you leave Uncle Tavi? He has become a mere shadow. He called on us yesterday. He wept. He says his life is aimless. That it was only for you..." Moved by her own words, she shed tears again. "He begs you to come home... and promises not to mix up in your affairs. Andrei, how can you be friends with those men? Look at their faces. Aren't you afraid of them? Andrei... if poor auntie were alive. Father also wants you to come. He wants to speak to you. He said to uncle: 'The boy — meaning you — knows what he is doing; it's not a bad thing that we have a communist among us.' "

Andrei felt he was beginning to lose his temper. He clenched his fists inside his pockets.

"Father sends you money."

"I don't want it. I've begun to earn my living...: Tell father that I may come home. But not now. It's only for him that I'll come... As for the others... do not expect anything of me. Good-bye."

Rodica did not understand what he meant.

"As you like. Here is a letter for you from Uncle George. Oh, dear! he too is a communist. It's catching like a disease..." Then she changed the subject: "You can't realize how well we are getting on. We've lots of money. Father is speculating in salt. We all love him very much. Liuț too has given up his profession as a teacher. He has been mobilized, but goes on working at his office. He is likely to go abroad on a commission for the prisoners' repatriation. If he can, he will take me along. We shall never come back. We'll settle in France or Italy. One can't live here. They want to change things here as they did in Russia..."

"If I don't see you again before you leave, I'm saying good-bye to you now," said Andrei.

He shook her gloved hand and left. He stopped a little further and read his Uncle George's post-card:

Dear Andrei,

It's a long time since I last saw you. When I left, you were children. I wonder now and then what you are like, you and Dan... Men. I have gone through much, I'll tell you about it all when we are together again. I was wounded at Debreczen. I'm now again in a hospital. Within a month's time I'll be home. I'd like to be with you sooner in these moments.

The years spent as a prisoner have meant to me more than all my life. At present all I wish to tell you is this: weigh things well; do not repeat the mistakes of my generation which is to some extent guilty of all that has happened — an obtuse, indifferent and selfish generation.

We have lived an aimless, wretched life. It was the war and all the calamities of these years that have taught us to understand at last that there is only one way that justifies

one's life : alongside one's people, with all one's heart, with all one's strength, We'll soon be together again.

With best love Uncle George.

Andrei stepped into the Party headquarters. As he walked along the long corridor, he thought of his uncle. He remembered him to be a judicious man who spoke seldom and was sparing with his caresses, but always ready to talk about any serious topic. He talked gravely about principles: modesty, economy, labour; he believed in them and put them into practice, simply, without ostentation. All those who talked about him set him up as an example. These ideals, however, had seemed inaccessible and none too attractive to Andrei. 'This means he too realizes that now something else is wanted,' he said to himself, 'something elementary perhaps: that life must have a sense if it is to be lived. Not carry it on one's back like a burden, but live it...'

He entered Robber's office; the latter received him effusively:

"So you've met the class enemy... tangibly, haven't you?" he joked. "Never mind, never mind. They'll pay for it one day, my boy. Here's a letter from a reader. I congratulate you. Big careers begin this way. There you are."

Andrei took the envelope and opened it. It contained only the following:

For shame, Andrei! Shame! Shame! Shame!

Ioachim Potra, a Rumanian

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

"Well, Comrade Sabin, so you are going to place your pen in the service of the working class? Have you made up your mind?"

"Yes, I'll do my..."

"All right, all right... To be unassuming... is excellent ... it foretells a big career... When you've written two or three things and got to know all about the issues at stake, you'll ask to join the Party. Are you eighteen? Of course you are. So that's all right. Now listen: this afternoon there's going to be a demonstration against Sănătescu and his government of saboteurs. You'll write a

few impressions: the crowd, the enthusiasm, the fervour and fury of the people. It's impressive and you'll like it. And be simple, simple. That's what we need here. Till then, are you busy?"

"Yes, I have to call on someone."

"Please yourself. At three o'clock be in the yard of the Dărnescu factory. D'you know Jurca, *le vieux?* Excellent chap! He's a figure, to be sure. Tip-top. Cheerio!"

Andrei walked leisurely, taking the longest way to Sonia's. He tried to look at the shabby shop-windows, at the houses with their walls scraped by shell splinters, at the people walking hastily as if they were all starving. All these were dim images that passed before him as if he looked at the world with short-sighted eyes. He had a feeling and he had had it from childhood, that now, very soon, something decisive would happen. Nevertheless, he felt a diffuse, gnawing anxiety.

At the corner of the street he stopped. He saw the untidy garden, the rusty spears of the fence, the bare trees full of rooks.

The thought that she may not be in flashed through his mind. He'd better... yes, ask Iurcovici to take a note to her. He would thus be spared the long way he did not wish to go, the blank questions people ask when meeting again: "What have you been doing?" "Where have you been?"

He sat down on a low cement fence, lit a cigarette and sat thus for quite a while. listening to the beating of his restless heart. And, as if his soul had at last found a rest after such a long struggle, he sat there looking at the grey houses, at the skeletal tops of the trees peeping out behind the tall fences, at the heavy, colourless sky that looked like a flag-stone.

The cold pierced him, but he could not make up his mind to rise from the low cement fence. He had never liked the beginning of winter: those uncertain, wet days, when everything seems to be cold, hostile. He enjoyed staying at home, his cheek against the terracotta stove, listening to the dull, muffled drone of the fire. His mother would bring him a cup of hot tea. Indoors, everything was neat, soothingly neat. He stood up resolutely. No use to...

At that moment, Sonia came through the gate and walked off in the opposite direction. He started quickly after her, gazing at her familiar gait, her brown hair with golden lights in it.

"Sonia!" he shouted. "Sonia!"

She turned round scared. At first she did not recognize him, then she turned pale. Andrei came up to her, took both her hands into his and, squeezing them, tried to find his voice:

"It's me," he murmured, "it's me... I have come..."

He could not bear the unnatural brightness of her greedy eyes. He bent his head. With a quick gesture she arranged a lock on his forehead. Her fingers lightly stroked his thin face, his eyes, his chapped lips. Andrei listened entranced to her trembling breath. He took her hand into his and they set off side by side, walking gently as if for a long walk...

"Andrei..."

"Yes, Sonia..."

"Andrei... I wanted to... I called on you one day... They told me... you were away... you had not come back yet... Then... I was so afraid... you know... mother forbade me to see you any more..."

Her words hurt him.

"You too?" he whispered. "You too, Sonia?"

"I've always waited for you... Yesterday I met Teddie Varga. He said that..."

Andrei's lips tightened. He wished to let go her hand, but she caught his fingers.

"He was very scared. He asked me to tell you when we meet, that he was drunk and wants you to forgive him."

"No. I'll pay back everyone of them. This is the simplest and most unfailing way to act."

"Hush!" she whispered, slipping her arm under his. "Hush... These past months I've been thinking so much of you. I think I didn't understand you before... and now, less than ever. Tell me: is what you do right? I mean... are you happy now?"

"It was the only thing I could do, Sonia. Everything happened so naturally that I could not help it. It's a logical ending...No, no!" he rectified quickly. "It's the beginning."

She shrugged her shoulders as if she were feeling cold.

"So many people call on us every day. Teachers, schoolmates of mine. Somebody who knows you well calls too, Mr. Suslănescu. He only speaks of catastrophes. The future is terrible, without any prospect of change..."

"For them, it is."

"And for us, Andrei?"

And he felt this far more deeply than he could havy told her and maybe words were of no avail now. The on le thing that mattered was this new confidence.

"What I'm telling you is very commonplace, Sonia, but the fact is that we've been groping, lured by very poor illusions... And even if the dreams we harboured had come true, I think that we'd have been happy only for a very short time... Like the man who has been starving for a long time and eats his fill only once."

They were unaware what way they had taken until they reached the high-school. Now it was a military hospital. Above the façade of the building which was like a prison or a 19th century town-hall, stood like a sentry the rain-washed plaster statue of a Minerva without an arm. Under it, a hilarious inscription, engraved in marble: *Repetitio mater studiorum est.* Without letting go of Sonia's hand, Andrei went up the steps and entered the hall. In the air there hovered a pungent smell of formol and medicines. The clock, as big as a cupboard, had stopped, riddled by bullets. Among the plaster busts for the drawing classes were heaps of blood-soaked dressing and pieces of plaster. Closing his eyes, Andrei leant against one of the clumsy pillars which gave the hall the aspect of a light-opera lobby.

When he turned to Sonia, his green eyes sparkled with a new light which she had not seen before.

"Sonia!"

His voice quivered. She came close to him.

"You know, Andrei... You must have known before. Not only words tell us certain things."

They remained like that, in the shade of the columns, listening to the muffled noises of the hospital.

The End